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The Proverbs of Agur

A Detailed Study of Proverbs 30

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A word about translations

The New International Version (NIV) is used as the standard version for this commentary. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the NIV.

Like any translation, the NIV has some difficulties, particularly in a few passages in the New Testament. These passages are disputed on textual grounds, but when such questions arise, the reader can usually improve the NIV translation by resorting to the alternate renderings given in the margin. Despite this relatively minor problem, it must also be acknowledged that the NIV is far in advance of the older versions in utilizing the latest archaeological discoveries and textual analyses to understand the Old Testament text.

The NIV is also an improvement upon others in its adoption of more modern, easier-to-understand language throughout. A modern English translation needs to be faithful to two masters: firstly, of course, to the original languages in which the inspired writers presented God's message; but secondly and equally importantly, to the language (i.e., modern English) in which that original message must now be read and received.

Furthermore, the NIV has been for some time the most popular and widely used modern version.

The Proverbs of Agur

A Detailed Study of Proverbs 30

Introduction

The full title of Proverbs 30 (v 1) identifies the words which follow as those of Agur, the son of Jakeh, for Ithiel and Ucal.

There are several things which we cannot know for certain:

- a) who Agur was,
- b) when these words were written,
- c) the meaning of the other names (i.e., Jakeh, Ithiel and Ucal), or even
- d) whether they are proper names or common nouns.

In all Bible study, we ought to remind ourselves that it is vain to seek certainty when God is silent.

Most likely someone other than Solomon wrote these sayings; they have a different tone than most of the preceding chapters. In fact, it is also uncertain whether all of Proverbs 30 should be attributed to one source.

Adam Clarke writes: “From the introduction [to Proverbs 30], from the names here used, and from the style of the book, it appears evident that Solomon was not the author of this chapter; and that it was designed to be distinguished from his work by this very preface [i.e., v 1], which specifically distinguishes it from the preceding work. Nor can the words in Proverbs 30:2,3,8,9 be at all applied to Solomon: they suit no part of Solomon’s life, nor of his circumstances. We must, therefore, consider it an appendix or supplement to the preceding collection; something in the manner of that part which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, had collected [cf Prov 25:1,2].”

On Proverbs 30, Derek Kidner writes: “This chapter owes its vividness largely to the author’s profound humility, confessed in verses 1-9 and expressed both by his detestation of arrogance in all its forms and by his fascinated, candid observation of the world and its ways. In the groupings of men and creatures there is sometimes a moral or spiritual lesson stated or implied; but the lessons are nowhere pressed and the dominant attitude is that of keen and often delighted interest, inviting us to look again at our world with the eye of a man of faith who is an artist and an observer of character.”

Further, Kidner writes that the last two chapters of Proverbs (attributed to Agur and Lemuel) “are both from non-Israelites, perhaps Arabians from Massa... The language of Proverbs 30:4 and the spelling of the word for God in Proverbs 30:5 are reminiscent of the book of Job, which is set in the same region” (see further comments on verse 1 below).

The most distinctive features of Agur’s proverbs are his numerical style of grouping similar items, his picturesque speech, and a unique phrase he uses: “There are three things... even four.” These groupings of four are called tetrads (or quatrains). The

first two chapters of Amos have a quite similar phrase: “For three sins of _____, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath” (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6).

Agur’s phrase occurs with minor changes five times (vv 15, 18, 21, 24, 29). A further grouping follows the same pattern, but without the same introduction (vv 11-14). Such a device may serve to emphasize the fourth item on the list (or even to introduce a fifth item).

Proverbs 30 has more than its share of difficulties:

- Hebrew words that occur infrequently or not at all elsewhere;
- images and phrases that are unique in the Bible; and
- ideas placed together, the connections of which are far from obvious.

While some may view these difficulties as nothing but problems, we will look at them as opportunities to learn.

In these tetrads of Agur, there is also some element of riddle or enigma. Indeed, this is to some extent true with all proverbs: the Book of Proverbs contains “dark sayings” (KJV), or “riddles of the wise” (Prov 1:6). The Hebrew for “riddle” is “chiydon”. Literally it means “to tie in knots”, and may refer to enigmatic sayings whose meanings are obscure or hidden, such as Samson’s riddle (Jdgs 14:12-14, 19; cp also Num 12:8) — or to an allegory (Ezek 17:2), a perplexing moral problem (Psa 49:4; 78:2), a difficult question (1Kgs 10:1 = 2Chron 9:1), or ambiguous words of intrigue (Dan 8:23).

Certain portions of this chapter call for the question: ‘What do these four and five things have in common?’ It may seem like a mere game, an amusement or diversion, but it is far more important than that. In the answering of each question, or at least the seeking for an answer, we may learn important new truths, or we may intensify upon our minds the impressions of lessons already learned.

Title (verse 1)

The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh — an oracle: This man declared to Ithiel, to Ithiel and to Ucal...

There have been many attempts to interpret these names:

- a) They have been translated as titles: e.g., “Agur” can mean “the collector, or gatherer”, and “Jakeh” can mean “the obedient”.
- b) Some versions interpret them as sentences. Instead of our “to Ithiel, to Ithiel and to Ucal”, the LXX, followed by the NIV margin, reads: “I am weary, O God, I am weary and faint.” The NEB reads: “I am weary, O God, I am weary and worn out.” And the TNIV: “I am weary, God; but I can prevail.” These renderings are useful to consider at least, since they lead easily into the confession of verses 2-4.
- c) In a different vein, Roland Murphy translates: “I am not God; I am not God, that I should prevail” (*Word Biblical Commentary*), while at the same time

pointing out that this is uncertain. And C.C. Torrey translates: "I am not a God, I am not a God that I should have power" (JBL 73 [1954], 93-96).

- d) The words may be taken as names of otherwise unknown philosophers in Solomon's day, such as those mentioned in 1 Kings 4:30,31: "Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite — wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations."
- e) Verse 1 has even been taken as referring to Solomon. Some rabbinical commentaries and some synagogue traditions use fanciful word meanings to suggest that this is a convoluted way of identifying Solomon himself. However, as Kidner points out, "There is no need to find here (as with the Vulgate) a *nom de plume* [an assumed name] for Solomon, requiring far-fetched interpretation."

"The sayings of" is "dabar", the words (of). This phrase introduces an inspired and/or prophetic utterance (cf 2Sam 23:1; Psa 36:1; 110:1; Jer 1:1; Amos 1:1; Prov 31:1; Eccl 1:1; Neh 1:1; etc).

Seemingly Jakeh was the father (or ancestor) of Agur, but the name occurs nowhere else. Beyond this reference, then, nothing is known for sure of such a man. "Jakeh" signifies "one who is obedient". Some speculate that, because of its form, it may have been paired with the name of God, forming "Jakeyah" which means "one obedient to Yahweh".

The Hebrew for "oracle", "massa", can mean a "prophecy"; it is sometimes translated "burden", and used of a prophetic utterance of doom, which a prophet is obliged to carry and then lay upon his listeners (e.g., Isa 13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1; Nah 1:1; Hab 1:1; Zech 9:1). The same word occurs also in Proverbs 31:1.

It is possible, but less likely, that "Massa" might be a place, either the birthplace or the home of Jakeh. Murphy translates "the Massaite". Such a name occurs in the list of Ishmael's sons (Gen 25:13-15; 1Chron 1:29-31). If this is so, then the writer of Proverbs 30 might be associated with the wise men of the East and the desert-dwelling Bedouin tribes (Job 1:3; Obad 1:8; Jer 49:7).

Are Ithiel and Ucal proper names of sons (or students) who received Agur's words, or contrived names of symbolic significance? If proper names, then they are not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, and that's the end of the matter. (A plainly different Ithiel is mentioned in Nehemiah 11:7.) The choice between alternatives depends on how the earlier part of this verse is treated. Ithiel may mean a number of things: "signs or precepts of God", "God is with me", or perhaps, "there is a God". Ucal may mean "to cease", "to faint", or "to be consumed".

"A proverb is the horse that can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas"
(Yoruban saying).

(4) Agur's confession of ignorance (verses 2-4)

Agur's confession of ignorance (vv 2,3) is followed by five questions (v 4) which call attention to the greatness of the LORD.

The "most stupid" of men? (verses 2,3)

"I am the most ignorant of men; I do not have a man's understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One."

Agur confesses that he is ignorant of the ways of God. "Ignorant" ("brutish" in the KJV, "simple" in the LXX) refers to his intellectual dullness; he is like the lower animals. The same word, "ba'ar", refers to the "senseless" and perishing beasts in Psalm 49:10-12, and again in Psalm 73:21,22, and to the "stupid" man who hates correction in Proverbs 12:1.

Agur's claim to being "brutish" (v 2) is here clarified in that he is not one of those who has knowledge or understanding of God (v 3). C.H. Toy thinks he is sarcastically referring to others who may have claimed such knowledge. If so, this verse would be akin to Job 32:9, where the young Elihu finally speaks to his elders: "It is not only the old who are wise [but *they* really aren't wise either!], not only the aged who understand what is right [but even *they* don't understand!]."

In this case, however, Agur would seem to be the elder (or father) addressing younger students (or sons). So Thomas Constable comments: "Behind this ironical section one can perhaps imagine Agur's sons [or disciples: v 1] claiming to be wiser than their father [or teacher]. Agur confessed his own limited understanding while at the same time making it clear that those he addressed knew no more than he did... Agur humbly regarded his own discernment as limited, but he did not claim to be a fool."

There is another way of imagining the scene behind the words. Agur might have been concerned that his disciples would think too highly of him, thinking his ways and thoughts were very far above theirs. To counteract this, he turns the matter back on himself. Since he was an eminent man in their estimation, he would confess his own ignorance. Their reactions would necessarily be: 'If you come to this conclusion about yourself, then where do *we* stand?' In a brilliant stroke, he avoids offending them, and yet he compares them, along with himself, to brute beasts in the sight of God, with nothing to commend them at all.

Made wiser by his suffering, Job makes a similar confession in Job 42:5,6: "My ears had heard of you [the LORD] but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

Kidner says there is in verse 2 "an undertone of irony at the expense of the average man's self-assurance", and then he points to 1 Corinthians 8:2: "The man who *thinks* he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know."

John Schultz writes: "It takes wisdom to recognize one's limitations... What this man says is that the deeper he penetrates into the mystery of wisdom, the more he realizes how little he knows. There may be a touch of irony in Agur's words, but

that does not diminish the depth of his understanding. It remains true that the closer we get to God the more incomprehensible He becomes. The apostle Paul states that it takes all the saints together ‘to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge’ (Eph 3:18,19).”

In this thought there is yet another echo of the Book of Job, this time Job 28: No matter how tirelessly one searches, true wisdom and understanding of divine things may seem elusive (cf Ps 139:6; Rom 11:33). The search for such wisdom may, and should, encompass a lifetime, but the search itself may be the means of discovery, renewal and rebirth.

Nor have I knowledge of the Holy One: The “Holy One” (“qedoshim”) is in the plural, as in Proverbs 9:10 (the only other place in Proverbs where it occurs). It may refer to the Sovereign LORD and God, with the plural pointing to His majesty, greatness and excellence — that is, He is the ‘Most Holy One of all’. Such a “plural of majesty” (as scholars call it) is often found in the Hebrew titles of the Deity.

Less likely, the plural may refer particularly to the multitudinous Angels of the Holy One Himself. The NRSV, for example, translates “the holy ones [plural]”, and puts “the Holy One [singular]” in the margin. A third possibility is: ‘I have no knowledge of holy *things*.’

Agur’s questions (verse 4)

Having claimed ignorance (vv 2,3), Agur now asks his listeners five questions that focus on the acts of God. These questions demonstrate that, no matter how wise human beings are (or, often, *think* they are), they are really so severely limited that they cannot even explain what the LORD does, much less *how* He does it.

As E.W. Clarkson puts it in The Pulpit Commentary: “We may know many things, but, when it is all told, what an infinitesimal fraction is this when compared with all that is unknown! What vast, inexhaustible treasures of truth and wisdom are hidden, and must remain hidden, in the air, in the earth, in the sea! How little, then, can we understand of Him, the Eternal and Infinite One, who reigns in the heavens! How unfathomable the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God (Rom 11:33)!”

In this verse, there is an echo of God’s questions in Job 38 (‘Where were you when I did this and that?’), and His other discourses in Job 39-41 (‘Do you know when I did this, or can you do this?’; ‘Who are you to question me?’).

There are also similarities with Proverbs 8:24-29, where the personified Wisdom speaks of her companionship with the Almighty from the beginning of His vast works. Also, the prophet Isaiah asks puny man to account for the workings of Omnipotence:

“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who has understood the mind [or Spirit] of the LORD, or instructed him

as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?” (Isa 40:12-14).

All these passages imply, with an ironic edge, that no one can compare himself with God.

Question 1: Who has gone up to heaven and come down?: First of all, “to come down” is a fairly common Bible idiom for what is technically called a theophany. This word comes from the Greek, and signifies a manifestation of the Divine presence and power among men. Thus:

*“The LORD **came down** to see the city and the tower [of Babel] that the men were building” (Gen 11:5).*

*“Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD **descended** on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently” (Exod 19:18).*

There are numerous examples of this usage (e.g., Gen 17:22; 18:21; Exod 3:7,8; 19:11, 20; 34:5; Psa 18:9,10; 68:18; 144:5,6; Deut 30:12; Isa 7:11; 64:1; Acts 7:34; Acts 10; Acts 11; cp also John 6:33,38,50,51,58,62).

In the same way, the end of a theophany, or the closing of an act of God-manifestation, is spoken of as “going up”:

*“When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God **went up** from him” (Gen 17:22).*

*“And the glory of the LORD **went up** from within the city...” (Ezek 11:23).*

See also Genesis 28:12, 17; 35:13; Judges 13:20; Psalms 47:5; 68:18.

It is a similar situation, and word usage, for men who have been called into the presence of the LORD. To ascend up to heaven is to receive knowledge of the LORD who dwells there, as Moses did when he ascended Sinai, the mount of the LORD. Here we ought to think of “heaven” not so much as a place above the earth, but as the place where God Himself is to be found. Likewise, then, to come down from heaven is to bring that word from God near to men:

“Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it” (Deut 30:11-14; cf Deut 29:29; Rom 10:6-8).

Moses’ journey up the mountain inaugurates a pattern for prophets. They ascend a high place, or are caught up in a vision, or have a dream, and find themselves in the presence of God (or His Angel). While there they receive revelations, after which they return to the company of other men to communicate what they have seen and heard (1Kgs 22:19-23; Isa 6:3; Dan 7:13,14; 2Cor 12:2-4; etc). Thus God

(or His Angel) may “come down” and then “go up”, while men must first “go up” to receive the inspired message and then “come down” to share it with others.

We see, then, that this first question in Proverbs 30:4 applies to God initially. But it may also apply to a man: Christ has gone up to heaven after descending to the grave (John 3:13), and from heaven he will yet come down to the earth again (Acts 1:9-11). We have seen that “to go up” and “to come down” are terms of theophany — respectively, the withdrawal of the LORD’s presence, and the renewal of His revelation to man. The revelation of Jesus the Messiah (God manifest in the flesh) is the preeminent example of Jehovah’s redemptive actions in the world. Likewise, the other questions that follow here have the same dual application: first to the Father, and then to His Son, in a subtle anticipation of the fuller manifestation of the New Testament.

The pages of Scripture provide some notorious examples of humans presumptuously seeking to go up to “heaven” under their own power, and without having been called. They do this in the vain hope of finding God, or perhaps in an even more vain attempt to act as “gods” themselves:

- In the Old Testament, this desire is as old as Eve, who wished that she and Adam might become “like God [or ‘gods’]” (Gen 3:5; cf Phil 2:6).
- Later, men sought to build themselves a city at Babel, with a tower that reached to the heavens (Gen 11). However, their tower was destroyed and they were scattered, and their language was confounded so that they could no longer even communicate with one another, much less with God.
- The proud king of Babylon-Assyria (Sennacherib?) wanted, in occupying Jerusalem, to ascend to “heaven” (the LORD’s throne) and become like God himself, but his plans were ignominiously thwarted (Isa 14:12-20; cp similar language in Ezek 28:11-19, and the more general use in Job 20:6,7 and Amos 9:2).
- In the New Testament, King Herod Agrippa arrayed himself in gorgeous robes and gave a speech to the people. This led to his being acclaimed as “a god” and exulting in the comparison. Then, “immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms [‘like a rotten cabbage’, Harry Whittaker put it] and died” (Acts 12:23).

Question 2: Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands?: The LORD has absolute sovereign control over the forces of nature. He has created the wind (Amos 4:13), and He holds it at bay in His storehouses until He is ready to release it. “He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses” (Psa 135:7; cf Psa 65:7; 89:9; 93:3,4; 107:28-30).

Jesus, in his rebuke that stilled the winds and the storm on the sea, was asserting his claim, alone among men, of holding the forces of nature under his control:

“A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?’ He got up,

rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!' " (Mark 4:37-41; cf Matt 8:26,27; 14:32,33).

Question 3: Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?: This phrase compares the clouds of the heavens to garments (e.g., Job 26:8). E.H. Perowne writes, "Men bind up water in skins or bottles; God binds up the rain-floods in the thin, gauzy texture of the changing clouds, which yet by His power does not rend under its burden of waters" (NET Notes). Job uses similar imagery in Job 38:8,9 (also v 16):

"Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness?"

The massive weather systems that may encompass sizeable portions of the whole globe at any moment, such as a Category 5 hurricane spanning half an ocean, are pictured here as the cloak which the LORD throws around Himself and His works. The word picture of Job 26:8-14 concludes with these words:

"And these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?"

The "outer fringe" (simply "parts" in the KJV) is literally "outskirts" (RV, ASV, RSV), as of a vast garment. In figurative language, the man who experiences the awesome power of the greatest storm imaginable is doing no more than touching the least fringe, or edge, of the LORD's garments.

Question 4: Who has established all the ends of the earth?: The "ends of the earth" signify here the people who live in the distant lands and islands, remote from the Land of Israel. The God of Israel, the only true God, is also the God of all the world and all mankind:

"Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (Psa 2:8).

"All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations" (Psa 22:27,28).

"He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him" (Psa 72:8, 11).

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isa 49:6).

Question 5: What is his name, and the name of his son?: The last of the five questions takes a step beyond the others; it relates not just to characteristics but also to identity, for in Bible usage the "Name" holds great significance.

It is not necessary that we spell the covenant Name of the LORD ("Yahweh", "Jehovah", and other variants) precisely, nor that we pronounce it uniformly. Ironically,

verse 5 adopts a different name for Him than the expected Yahweh, or Jehovah. It uses “Eloah”, a characteristic Name for the LORD in the Book of Job.

What *is* necessary is that we recognize what that Name means, in all its forms, as it alludes to the LORD’s character revealed through His word and His actions. This means also that we recognize His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the fullest demonstration of His purpose (cp Heb 1:1,2). This means in turn that we devote our lives to understanding that character and that purpose, and to living more and more in the likeness of the Father and the Son. The Name of the LORD *is* the Name of His Son. By our belief in the Father through that Son, their Names become our name also.

Thus it follows, from this and the previous verses, that, when such a special Son (the only begotten) of such a Father is finally conceived and born, we will do well to learn all that we can about him. But at the same time, we will also do well to recognize that the Son’s “Name” (his character and purpose) will likewise elude our absolute comprehension. Such a Son of God “has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself” (Rev 19:11,12). In fact, it may be spoken: it is “the Word of God” (v 13); but its depths and heights can scarcely be comprehended by us, since we are constituted, for now, in this weak flesh. “In him are *hidden* all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3).

This thought might warn us that, even as we search for him, we must guard against presumptuous speculation about the genetic make-up, proneness to sin, temptability, and such like of this most unique of all human beings. Things that have been revealed we gratefully receive, as best we are able, meanwhile recognizing that other, “secret things” belong to the LORD alone (Deut 29:29).

Tell me if you know!: This last little phrase — ‘Tell me if you know!’, or ‘If you know!’ — may well apply to all the previous questions. It is similar to the “Tell me, if you understand” of Job 38:4, and the “Tell me, if you know all this” of Job 38:18. But it applies especially well to the final question, for it was to the very nature of the coming Messiah, and the extent to which he might truly claim to be the Son of the Almighty, that the eyes of so many Jews were closed, despite numerous hints in their own Scriptures.

As believers in Christ, are our eyes as open as they should be to “knowing” God? Should Agur’s words of exhortation and warning be addressed to us also? “Tell me, *if* you know!” Of course, we must exert ourselves, with the utmost effort and sincerity, to “know... the only true God, and Jesus Christ” (John 17:3). But in our pursuit of greater knowledge, we must also be on guard not to fray the ties that bind us to one another, as we are, hopefully, bound to our God and our Savior.

When our Lord Jesus Christ faced his last and greatest trial, in the last hours of his mortal life, he knew that he had little time left to advise his followers. So he spoke to them of continuing to “know” God, presumably more fully and more perfectly. But he also spoke — and at greater length — of the importance of them continuing to be “one” with each other (vv 11,21-23). His words in John 17 are an exhortation — as well as a warning — to us.

A parallel with John 3

Following a suggestion from Harry Whittaker, let us consider some of the parallels between:

- a) these previous few verses in Proverbs 30 (especially vv 1-4, with a thought from v 5 as well), and
- b) Nicodemus's interview with Jesus (John 3:1-21):

Proverbs 30:1-5	John 3:1-21
Agur is a great teacher (v 1)...	...As is Nicodemus...
Nevertheless Agur knows himself to be ignorant of much of God's revelation (vv 2,3)	Despite being a member of the Jewish ruling council (v 1) and "Israel's teacher" (v 10), Nicodemus "does not understand these things"
"Who has gone up to heaven and come down?" (v 4)	"No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven — the Son of Man" (v 13)
"Who has gathered up the wind ['ruach'] in the hollow of his hand?" (v 4) <i>[In Hebrew, the words for "wind" and "spirit" are the same]</i>	"Born of the Spirit ['pneuma']" (v 5); "The wind ['pneuma'] blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit ['pneuma']" (v 8) <i>[In Greek also, the words for "wind" and "spirit" are the same]</i>
"Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?" (v 4)	"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (v 5)
"Who has established all the ends of the earth?" (v 4)	God is concerned about "everyone" (v 15) — the "ends of the earth" as well as Israel, i.e., Gentile as well as Jew!
"What is his name, and the name of his son?" (v 4)	God's "only begotten Son" (v 16)
"He is a shield to those who take refuge in him" (v 5)	Eternal life is offered to "everyone... whoever believes in him" (vv 15,16)

Surely, if and when Nicodemus remembered the passage from Proverbs 30, he would have reflected on its parallels in what he had heard. He would come to realize more fully that, in speaking to the rabbi Jesus, he was dealing with One who had an extraordinary relationship with the Lord of the entire Universe, and thus One who could truly claim to be the Messiah.

(5) God's Word is trustworthy (verses 5,6)

'Adding and subtracting'

"Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar."

The Word of Eloah is trustworthy; it has no defects and flaws, nothing false or misleading. It is therefore safe to trust in that Word. So sure is God's Word that to trust in it is to trust in Him. To add to or take from God's perfect Word is to question Him, to lie about His integrity, and to imply that His Word cannot be trusted. In effect, it is to call Him a liar. And God will not countenance such a lying accusation against Himself.

"God" is "Eloah" here; the only time the name occurs in Proverbs (although it is common in the Book of Job, where it appears 41 times).

Every word of God is flawless: Extraordinarily, the word translated "word" here, "imrah", occurs only this once in the whole of the Proverbs. It does occur 25 times in the Psalms (19 times in Psalm 119 alone). It may be differentiated from other words describing God's Word in that it speaks especially of His promises. This can be illustrated by its usages in Psalm 119: God's "imrah" becomes His "promise" to the righteous (vv 38, 58, 76, 82, 140, 162), which is sweet (v 103) and able to renew and sustain the believer (vv 50, 116, 154). His "imrah" is also worthy of meditation (v 148), as it encompasses salvation (vv 41, 170).

"Flawless" is "pure" (KJV), "purified" (NET), "proven true" (RSV), or "tried" (ASV), as in the fire: "All the words of God are tried in the fire" (LXX). This Hebrew word is "tsaraph", which is used elsewhere of purifying metal: "The words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined ['tsaraph'] in a furnace of clay, purified seven times" (Psa 12:6). As the Word of God has been tested and refined by fire, so those who follow God's Word will be tested, and "refined ['tsaraph'] like silver" (Psa 66:10).

Other passages also compare the Word of God to metal that has been purified: Psalms 19:9,10; 119:140 (where "promises" is the Hebrew "imrah"); and Proverbs 15:26. Numerous other passages also speak of believers having their faith tried as by fire, either bringing them to perfection or to rejection:

"But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver" (Mal 3:2,3).

"These [trials] have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1Pet 1:7; cf also Isa 1:25; 48:10,11; Jer 6:29,30; 9:7; Ezek 22:20,21; 24:11,12; Dan 11:35; Zech 13:9; 1Cor 3:13).

God is a "shield" ("magen" (cf Gen 15:1; Psa 3:3; 7:10; 28:7; 47:9; 59:11; 84:9; 89:18; etc) to those who take refuge in Him, or who "flee to Him for protection ['chacah']" Psalm 18:30 (cf 2Sam 22:31) practically reproduces this whole verse:

“The word of the LORD is flawless [‘tsaraph’]. He is a shield [‘magen’] for all who take refuge [‘chasa’] in him.”

“Chasa” (“to take refuge”) is used 37 times in the Old Testament: “Apart from two exceptions (Jdgs 9:15 and Isa 30:2), the verb is used exclusively of seeking refuge in Yahweh. As a ‘rock’ (Deut 32:37), a ‘shield’ (Psa 144:2; Prov 30:5), and even a mothering bird with outstretched wings (Psa 57:1; 61:4), Yahweh can be trusted. In fact, it is better to seek refuge in God than any human being, including rulers (Psa 118:8,9)” (NIDOTTE). Generally, also see Proverbs 18:10 (although it does not use the same word): “The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.”

The figure of a nesting mother bird, sheltering and protecting her young with her overshadowing wings, is a powerful image. The fledgling in the nest will not understand this concept intellectually, but it surely does understand it in practice. There is a kinship and a oneness in such a picture. The LORD our God is our Near Kinsman, and He reminds us of this fact whenever we think of His relationship to His only-begotten Son, and our relationship with that same Son in faith. In love, He sought us out and made us His own; we are nothing less than His special treasure.

There is nothing automatic, nothing mechanical, in such a “refuge”. True faith, in God’s Word, is a visceral reliance on Him as a Protector, as the *only* Protector! Those who flee to Him to take refuge do more than memorize true Bible principles — they seek to *live* by them! They yearn and groan, in dark nights when despair feels close at hand, and out of that darkness they cry, ‘Where shall we go, O LORD? You are the only refuge in a cold, heartless world! There is no other place, and no other person, to shelter us; it is You alone.’

Do not add to his words: God’s warning in this respect is twofold. He spoke through Moses in Deuteronomy 4:2:

“Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you” (also cf Deut 12:32; Eccl 3:14; Jer 26:2).

We must not “add to” or “take from” God’s word. To do either is equivalent to what Paul calls “distorting the word of God” (2Cor 4:2, NIV), or “handling the word of God deceitfully” (KJV).

At the end of the last book of the New Testament, the LORD makes plain that He has not deviated one iota from this commandment. Through His Son He speaks:

“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Rev 22:18,19).

The Word of God was just as sacred, just as untouchable, to the Lord Jesus and his apostles, as it was to Moses and the wise men of the Old Testament.

Agur stresses only the ‘Do not add to’ portion of the command, and not the ‘Do not take away from’, but it has the same effect nonetheless. Anyone who possesses the purified Word of God (v 5), and who then ‘adds’ something to it, whether an additional would-be ‘revelation’, a thoughtless interpretation, an unwarranted assumption, or a wrong application — *in a manner to suggest that his addition possesses the same authority as the original* — is polluting the Word of God with a foreign substance, and changing its essential character. He is thereby lessening the truthfulness and the flawlessness of the whole, and ‘taking away’ from its intended effectiveness. This thought should make us doubly careful not to hijack any part of the Bible for our own agenda, not to search the Bible for a special justification for our own personal crochets, and not to pick and choose what we like while rejecting or ignoring the rest.

This necessarily raises the question: ‘Is any interpretation whatsoever an example of “adding to” the Word of God? And if so, then how can we ever begin to interpret anything?’

Of course, every interpretation is *not* “adding to” the Word of God. There are the essentials of the faith, what we usually call the “first principles”. While we continue to study these, certainly, we understand that many Bible passages prove them. We risk going too far, however, when we advance a personal interpretation of some relatively uncertain matter (that is, something that is not an integral part of first-principles doctrine). When we advance speculative ideas, we ought always to preface our remarks with the caveat (explicit or implicit) that this is an opinion and nothing more. We should not insist upon others accepting our interpretations on non-essential matters. Neither should we enforce our ideas (explicitly or implicitly) through discrimination, shunning, prejudice, or any other adverse treatment of those who do not agree with us.

Especially are these warnings needed in the area of prophetic interpretations, where the temptation is strong to put forward speculative ideas about future events, and even to present those ideas as practically equivalent to the Word of God itself. Here is surely the greatest danger of “adding to” the word of prophecy through our personal expectations. Our history as a community should show how many times such speculations have been proven wrong by the passage of a few years.

Or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar: In Deuteronomy 4, the consequences of adding to or taking from the Word of God are seen in “what the LORD did at Baal Peor”, when He “destroyed from among you everyone who followed” other gods (Deut 4:3) — 24,000 in the great plague (Num 25:9). It doesn’t get any more serious than that!

In Revelation 22, the threatened consequences are explicit: God will “add to” such a man all “the plagues described in this book”. (Is “this book” only the Book of Revelation, or everything that went before as well? It scarcely matters: either is a terrifying prospect.) And then, as if the first were not enough, and for good measure, God promises that He “will take away from” such a man “his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book”.

Such warnings as these amplify Agur's relatively light warning: "He will rebuke you and prove you a liar." Notice, though, a further connection in Revelation 22. Just before the words of warning cited above, there are the frightening words of verse 15: "Outside..." — 'Outside' what? the gates of the city, where the tree of life is (v 14) — "Outside are... those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters." It is an awful list of the most abominable creatures in the Lord's sight; but he is not finished. He must add "and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" — i.e., every liar!

(6) Agur's prayer (verses 7-9)

'Not too little, not too much, but just right!'

"Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God."

Agur's prayer is "that God will prevent him from becoming deceitful (v 8a) and self-sufficient (vv 8b,9). He wants to be honest in all his dealings, and he wants a life of balanced material blessings... So acknowledging his own ignorance [vv 1-4], relying on God's word for security in life [vv 5,6], and praying that God will keep him from falling into temptation [vv 7-9], Agur is ready to offer his words" (Allen Ross).

John Schultz offers a thoughtful comment, and along the way mentions the distinction we often recognize between the Psalms and the Proverbs. As he points out, both of these are equally necessary in God's revelation: "David asked God for one thing: 'One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple' (Psa 27:4). Agur asks for two: 'Make me honest and do not lead me into temptation.' David's and Agur's desire are related. Agur may sound more down to earth than David, more realistic. Nevertheless, without a concept of the beauty of the LORD, the desire for honesty and the understanding of the dangers of undermining integrity could not have risen in Agur's heart."

"The two requests which converge on one goal, concern:

- 1) character (v 8a), and
- 2) the circumstances that endanger character (vv 8b,9).

The prayer confirms the humility professed in verses 2-4, and unfolds it as:

- a) humility of ambition (a longing — before I die — for godly integrity, not for great things for self), and
- b) humility of self-knowledge... [Agur] might have prayed to use poverty or riches rightly, but knows his frailty too well" (Kidner).

Schultz again: "Rarely is human frailty so well expressed and so uncompromisingly exposed as in these verses. It is relatively easy to say things like these about

mankind in general, but it is difficult to confess about yourself that you cannot be trusted. Agur's prayer sounds like the opposite of Jabez' prayer: "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request' (1Chron 4:10). We tend to lean more in the direction of Jabez than of Agur. Most people are afraid of poverty but they do not mind becoming rich. Rarely do people ask God to keep them from either. Agur did not trust himself but he trusted the LORD."

Two things I ask of you, O LORD: Wisdom literature often groups things in twos and fours, or in other numerical arrangements (e.g., Amos 1:3 — 2:6; Job 5:19; Prov 6:16-19). We will see a number of these arrangements in the words of Agur (vv 15, 18, 21, 24, 29).

O LORD: "LORD" (i.e., Jehovah or Yahweh) is not in the original, but the NIV translators added it to stress that this is in fact a prayer.

Do not refuse me before I die: Agur is not asking that God finally grant his request at one point in the future. Instead, he is praying (as, presumably, he has before) that: 'Now and hereafter, as long as I live, *and until the day I die*, continue keeping me from both dangerous extremes — that of poverty and that of riches.'

Keep falsehood and lies far from me: The two words form a hendiadys, a literary device expressing an idea by means of two words linked by "and", in which one noun may be understood as an adjective modifying the other noun. In this instance, "falsehood and lies" may mean: 'false lies', i.e., the very worst kind of lies, or perhaps 'lying falsehood', the most deceptive kind of falsehood. Basically, the linking of two similar words, as here, acts as an emphasis, or a compounding effect. Not just lies, but very great lies.

Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread: In the materialistic age, we see all around us men and women striving for greater things. They are seeking better work conditions, better pay, a better position in society. Even for Christ's brethren, there may be immense pressure to "succeed" in the things of this life, a success which is measured purely in terms of social advantages, and material possessions. Yet when measured against the standards of Divine Wisdom, such a 'success' proves to be nothing less than failure.

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

This was the exhortation of the Lord Jesus, introducing his parable of the man planning to build bigger and better barns in which to store his accumulated wealth.

Although riches are not to be sought after, neither is there any virtue in poverty. Some suppose that there is righteousness in becoming poor for poverty's sake, and so give up all to live on the goodwill of others. But, there can be no virtue in intentionally making ourselves burdensome to others. Indeed, Scripturally, poverty is associated with shame:

"He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored" (Prov 13:18).

As John Marshall writes in *The New Life*: “Work is creative and constructive and develops skills, confidence and responsibility in a man, whereas idleness corrupts and destroys character, except in a man who is beyond the age or is too infirm to work. God is never idle; His creations in the heavens and on the earth are evidences of the constancy of His purposes. Work prolongs the will to live, but the man who retires to a corner whilst still capable of work, loses it.

“Fortunate is he who enters a profession or makes a lifetime choice of a task which deeply interests him; he will enjoy life to a greater extent and be likely to serve the Faith the better.

“There can be such a joy in work that there may be little thought of the money to be gained by it. A maker of wooden bowls in a primitive workshop was once told by a visitor, ‘You could make a lot of money out of these bowls.’ The workman’s reply was, ‘I do not want to make money; I want to make bowls.’ Obviously he had to have money to live, but money was not his main concern — and it should not be ours.”

Robert Roberts writes: “‘Neither poverty nor riches’ is the condition commended in the Proverbs. This is in strict harmony with the spirit of the New Testament. Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of’ [Matt 6:8], and taught them to pray for their daily bread; but on the subject of pursuing riches, he used the parable of the man with the barns, described as a fool, ‘which had much goods laid up for many years; and whose life was suddenly required of him. Christ’s comment on the case is, ‘So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God’ [Luke 12:21].”

The word for “daily bread” (“khoq”) means “statute”; it is also used of:

- a definite assignment of labor, a “quota” (Exod 5:14); or
- a set portion — an allotment or ration — of food (Gen 47:22; Prov 31:15; cf Luke 12:42 in the NT).

Here Agur refers to food that is a sufficient portion, each day, for him. Job (Job 23:12) and the Lord Jesus (Matt 6:11; Luke 11:3) both refer to “daily bread”, surely with this idea of an allotted portion — not too much or too little.

In the Greek, the word used by Jesus is “epiousios”; in the New Testament it only occurs in the Lord’s Prayer. According to the best authorities, it only occurs infrequently outside the New Testament, and its meaning is far from certain. The early Church father Tertullian had already rendered it “daily” by the second century AD, but there was some controversy about this even at such an early date.

To understand the meaning of “daily bread”, both here and in the Lord’s Prayer, we may need to consider the linguistic difficulties of the Greek word, but at the same time we can surely rely on the practical lesson of the manna in the wilderness (Exod 16; Num 11). During Israel’s wilderness sojourn, the manna was provided “as much as needed” (Exod 16:16-18), but not more, and it was definitely not to be hoarded (vv 19,20).

An old rabbi, Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, taught: “If anyone has bread in his basket

and says, 'What shall I eat tomorrow?' he belongs to those who are small in trust."

Likewise, Koheleth (the "Preacher") says, "Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind" (Eccl 4:6). And in a similar vein another proverb tells us: "Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil. Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred" (Prov 15:16,17).

It is a great lesson to learn, says Paul, "to be content whatever the circumstances", to be content "in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in poverty or in want" (Phil 4:11,12). Finally, Paul tells us again: "Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." On the other hand, he adds, "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1Tim 6:6-10). The old Scottish proverb is useful here also: "Better to be warmed by a small fire than burned by a great one."

At the same time, we should also remember that those who are so poor that they must steal to satisfy their hunger are not despised in the same way that other thieves might be (Prov 6:30).

The KJV translates this last phrase of Proverbs 30:8, rather quaintly but not inaccurately: "Feed me with food convenient for me." Daniel and his friends, when offered the richest of foods for their daily ration from the king's table, requested instead vegetables and water (Dan 1:10-12), and were undoubtedly healthier for their diet, which was more "convenient", or suitable, for them.

Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, "Who is the LORD?" Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God: The first part ("Who is the LORD?") sounds like the rich, miserly and irreverent Nabal after he was informed of David's request for food for himself and his men:

"Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?" (1Sam 25:10).

Sadly, the last part of the phrase (becoming poor, stealing, and dishonoring the Name of God) sounds like David himself who, when informed of Nabal's answer, lets his poverty lead him into thoughts of murder and plunder. So he rashly said: "It's been useless — all my watching over this fellow's property in the desert so that nothing of his was missing. He has paid me back evil for good. May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!" (1Sam 25:21,22).

"Who is the LORD?": A man who has too much wealth might mistakenly suppose he can do without God. When God was bringing the Israelites into the rich land of Canaan, He took special care that Moses repeat His commands again. God

understood plainly that material abundance might make it easier for His people to forget Him and what He had done for them:

“When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Deut 8:10-14; cf Deut 31:20).

The rich young ruler evidently had an excess of this world’s goods, for he turned away, even if sadly and reluctantly, from Jesus, when faced with choosing between his money and the Lord (Matt 19:16-22). We can only hope (and there is some evidence for it) that he later changed his mind and found his way back to the Master.

“Who is the LORD?” is the question (at least the implied question) of the “fool” in Psalms 14:1; 53:1: “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” It is the question asked by Pharaoh: “Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go” (Exod 5:2). It is also what Job had heard from the wicked around him: “Yet they say to God, ‘Leave us alone! We have no desire to know your ways. Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him? What would we gain by praying to him?’” (Job 21:14,15).

It may well be that at least some of those who question the existence of God do so for reasons hidden even to themselves. Perhaps they question the existence of any “God” because they are perfectly comfortable with seeing themselves as the supreme Power in their own lives. Rich, powerful, and very ‘successful’ people are most susceptible to this terrible delusion. We have all heard the story of the so-called “self-made man” who, of course, “worshipped his creator”! His “god” looked just like himself, and he was perfectly pleased to worship and serve that one “god” whom he saw in his mirror, and no other.

(7) Against slander (verse 10)

“Do not slander a servant to his master, or he will curse you, and you will pay for it.”

This one verse, a warning against slander, appears to be a stand-alone proverb. However, it also may be seen (along with vv 11-14) as an elaboration on the first of the two things Agur prays for in verses 8 and 9: “Keep falsehood and lies far from me.” Seen in this way, “slander” is just one more falsehood and one more lie. In other words, Agur is praying: ‘Keep falsehood, lies, and slanders far from me.’

Furtermore, linking verse 10 with verses 11-14 may help clarify the overall outline of the chapter. Of the six “three things, even four” groups in the chapter, the only one that doesn’t have an introduction is the first one (vv 11-14). However, if verse 10 is seen as that introduction, then we might summarize the first “three-four” group (vv 10-14) this way:

‘There are three characteristics of arrogant people who slander others (v 10), four characteristics of those who set themselves against the righteous:

- 1) they curse their parents (v 11);
- 2) they are proud of their sins and immoral behavior (v 12);
- 3) they are haughtily dismissive of others (v 13); and
- 4) they use their mouths like weapons to destroy others (v 14).’

The precise meaning of verse 10 is not very clear on first reading, and the expositor will need to consider several possible interpretations.

“Slander” is the Hebrew “lashan”, which literally means “to wag the tongue”. The same word is used in Psalm 101:5 to signify defaming or slandering.

The result of such slander is that the accused servant may bring a curse or countercharge (“qalal”) against the accuser — and thus the original accuser will in turn “pay for it” or be “found guilty” (“asham”).

“Qalal” (“to curse”) may also be rendered “to treat [someone] lightly or shamefully”:

“Do not curse [‘qalal’] the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD” (Lev 19:14).

“The Philistine [Goliath] cursed [‘qalal’] David by his gods” (1Sam 17:43).

“Do not revile [‘qalal’] the king even in your thoughts, or curse [‘qalal’] the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say” (Eccl 10:20; cf the same word in Josh 24:9; Jdgs 9:26–28; 1Sam 3:13; 2Sam 16:5–13; Eccl 7:21,22).

“Asham” (“to pay for it”: NIV; “to be found guilty”: KJV) occurs only this once in Proverbs. Its primary meaning centers on the idea of guilt, but its precise meaning in any single verse can vary, from:

- an action, or sin, which brings guilt, to
- the condition of being guilty, and finally on to
- the punishment for the sin.

Any individual who sins, even unintentionally through error or ignorance, was considered guilty. This, when proved, required the priest to “make atonement for him for any of these sins he has committed, and he will be forgiven” (Lev 5:13).

The other possibility is that the “he” (of “he will curse you”) refers to the master, not the servant. By that reading, the *master* might investigate the charges, find them to be false or baseless, and then turn his anger toward the one bringing the charge.

Even though the proverb seems to be restricted to accusing a servant to his master, it may have a broader meaning, inasmuch as we all are, or should be, servants to the Divine Master. So Paul says:

“Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Rom 14:4).

And James also says:

“Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it” (James 4:11).

Both these passages warn brothers and sisters against appropriating the office of “judge”, and especially when pronouncing judgment upon others in the household of God. True, there are times when ecclesias will need finally to take action toward wrongdoers, for their own good as well as the well-being of the ecclesia. But such action should be taken carefully and prayerfully, after proper deliberation and consultations, and only after opportunities for the subject to repent and change. The verses cited above warn against individuals rendering judgments of their own, prematurely and without allowing for, and participating in, ecclesial investigation of the matter.

Examples of slander which illustrate this proverb may be noted:

- a) Doeg the Edomite slandered Ahimelech the priest to King Saul by implying that Ahimelech was assisting David in a conspiracy to kill Saul (1Sam 22:8-10). This was, of course, untrue (1Sam 24:9,10). While Ahimelech did not curse Doeg, David did, in Psalm 52.
- b) Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth (2Sam 9:12), slandered his master to David (2Sam 16:3; 19:27). When David found out about this he reversed the promise he had given Ziba, and gave him only half of his former master’s property (2Sam 19:29).
- c) The Babylonians slandered Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to their master Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3:8).
- d) Those who later slandered Daniel (Dan 6) were themselves cast into the lions’ den.

Finally, as a last possibility, the LXX translates the verse differently: “Do not deliver a servant into the hands of his master.” Though perhaps less likely, this rendering may refer to the treatment of a runaway slave. The Law of Moses provided for such a situation:

“If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master. Let him live among you wherever he likes and in whatever town he chooses. Do not oppress him” (Deut 23:15,16).

If it is understood this way, then the proverb throws an interesting light on Paul’s letter to Philemon, which Paul sent to him along with the runaway slave Onesimus, who had made his way to Paul to ask for help. In the letter, Paul is plainly telling Philemon: ‘I am returning your brother, not handing over an escaped slave.’

While verse 10 has its own inherent difficulties of interpretation, it should be noted that verses in Proverbs abound, warning against the evils of slander, gossip, lies, false witnesses, and talebearing:

- Haughty eyes and a lying tongue can lead to the shedding of innocent blood (6:17).
- False witnesses and liars stir up dissension among brothers (6:19; cf 14:5, 25), and undermine justice (19:28).

- A false witness is like a club, sword, or sharp arrow to destroy one's neighbor (25:18).
- Fools spread slander (10:18).
- Gossips betray confidence (11:13; 20:19), and separate friends (16:28).
- Scoundrels plot evil, and their speech is like a fire, destroying all before it (16:27).
- Gossips proliferate when others enjoy listening to them (18:8; 26:22).
- False witnesses and liars will perish (19:5, 9), as well as those who listen to them (21:28).

(8) Tetrad One: Four facets of arrogance (verses 11-14)

“There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers; those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth; those whose eyes are ever so haughty, whose glances are so disdainful; those whose teeth are swords and whose jaws are set with knives to devour the poor from the earth, the needy from among mankind.”

These verses constitute the first of Proverbs 30's six tetrads (a tetrad being a grouping of four items). They describe four features of arrogant people:

- 1) They curse their parents (v 11).
- 2) They are proud of their sins and immoral behavior (v 12).
- 3) They are haughtily dismissive of others (v 13).
- 4) They use their mouths like weapons to destroy others (v 14).

All four items listed here begin with the Hebrew word “dowr” (“generation”): “There is a generation...” (vv 11-14). “Dowr” appears many times in the Psalms, meaning either:

- an age or period of time (Psa 49:11, 19; 61:6; 71:18; 72:5; Jer 2:31; 7:29), or perhaps
- a class or group of people (Psa 12:7; 14:5; 24:6; 95:10; 112:2).

In the New Testament, the Greek “genea” corresponds to the Hebrew “dowr”, with the same dual meaning (Matt 11:16; 12:45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36).

The passage about the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 provides an interesting usage of “dowr” in verse 8:

*“By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and who can speak of his descendants? [‘who shall declare his **generation**?’: KJV; or ‘who of his **generation** considered?’: NIV margin].”*

Here, the simple meaning is that the Messiah will be cut off without literal “generations” (descendants), but the passage also implies that he will have a spiritual “generation”, not created by blood descent and the passage of time, but by knowledge and developed likeness (see Isa 53:10-12). For such a “generation”, the affinity

with the LORD's Servant is no longer a matter of physical descent but of spiritual connection, no longer time-related but class-related.

Back in Proverbs 30, the KJV, ASV and NET translate "There is a generation", but the RSV and NIV choose the simpler "There are those who... those whose...", etc.

Is Agur speaking of a particular period of time in which evil predominates? Or is he speaking of a particular class of people who might well be found in any generation? Either option seems possible. However, the similarities between these verses and Paul's description of the "terrible times in the last days" (2Tim 3:1-7, particularly vv 2-4) may point more toward the first option. Consider some of the parallels with 2 Timothy 3, along with Romans 1 also:

Proverbs 30	2 Timothy 3:2-4	Romans 1:18-32
11. They curse their parents	2. Disobedient to their parents, ungrateful	30. They disobey their parents
12. Pure in their own eyes	2. Lovers of themselves	32. Knowing they deserve death, they not only continue to do these things but also approve of those who do them
12. Not cleansed of their filth	2. Unholy; 3. Without self-control, brutal; 4. Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God	24. Sexual impurity, the degrading of their bodies; 26,27. Shameful lusts, unnatural relations, indecent acts; 28,29. Depraved minds
13. Those whose eyes are haughty	2. Lovers of money, boastful, proud	22. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; 30. Insolent, arrogant and boastful
13. Those whose glances are disdainful	3. Without love, unforgiving; 4. Conceited	29. Envy, malice
14. Those whose teeth are swords...	3. Slanderous; 4. Treacherous	29,30. Full of strife, gossips, slanderers; 31. Heartless, ruthless

Even then, this answer leaves further questions to be asked: "What are the last days to which Paul refers in 2 Timothy? His own day, or our own day, or something broader and/or longer?" For surely to some degree, these four "generations" have been found in every age. They always have been, and always will be, until Christ's coming and God's perfect kingdom.

#1. There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers: The Law of Moses warns against just this abuse, or cursing, of parents (Exod 21:17; Lev 20:9; Deut 27:16; cf Prov 20:20); it was in fact a capital offense. The Law also commands, positively, that children bless and honor their parents (Exod 20:12; Lev 19:3, 32; cf Prov 23:22-25). “Curse” is the same “qalal” as in verse 10; it signifies to treat lightly, shamefully or disrespectfully.

Charles Bridges writes, “Many are the forms in which this proud abomination shows itself: resistance of a parent’s authority (2Sam 15:1-10), contempt of his reproof (1Sam 2:25), shamelessly defiling his name (2Sam 16:22), needlessly exposing his sin (Gen 9:22), coveting his substance (Prov 19:26; Jdgs 17:2), and denying one’s obligations to him (Matt 15:4-6).”

In his teaching about the “corban”, or gift, Jesus shows that children may honor their parents in the most practical way by providing for their care and not shirking their responsibility (Matt 15:3-9; Mark 7:6-13). Realizing their parents were the ones who cared for them when they were young and helpless, children should especially heed the command to honor them. Furthermore, Jesus’s words strongly suggest that he who does not honor his father or mother does not honor God either. Failing to bless is equivalent to cursing.

We are commanded to honor our parents because they are God’s instruments of creation. Without them we would not exist. Failing to recognize that we owe our lives to our parents, and that subsequently we owe them honor, means failing to recognize God as our Creator and Father, whom we are especially obliged to honor.

References to father and mother recur in verse 17, after the next tetrad, suggesting a connection between the first two groups of four in this chapter. In fact, the curses (the warnings of judgment) in that verse make a fitting conclusion to verses 11-14 also, since they supply the punishment, in graphic description, that seems to be lacking from the first series:

“The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures.”

#2. Those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth: The word for “cleansed” (“rakhats”) means “to wash; to wash away; to bathe”. It is used of physical and ceremonial washings, and hence figuratively of removing sin and guilt through confession (e.g., Isa 1:16; Psa 26:6; 73:13; cf Deut 21:6).

Likewise, “filth” (“tsow’ah”: meaning excrement or bodily excretions of every sort) may refer to physical uncleanness (cf Isa 4:4; 28:8; 36:12), but also metaphorically to moral defilement (Zech 3:3,4). When Zechariah describes the removal of the high priest Joshua’s defiled garments (Zech 3:3-5), he is plainly referring to Joshua being cleansed from guilt and then receiving a new standing as the LORD’s representative before the people.

There are those — especially in religious circles, unfortunately — who see themselves as “pure” (“tahowr”: cf the same word in Prov 20:9; 22:11; Psa 51:10; Ezek 36:25). They think they are something when really they are nothing (Gal 6:3). Like

the Laodiceans, they say to themselves, 'We are rich; we have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But they do not realize that they are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (Rev 3:17).

In effect, such 'pure ones' are so depraved that they cannot understand their own depravity, and so perverse that they cannot see their own perversity. So they go about seeking to prove some imagined 'purity' by diligently keeping every outward ritual, and developing "a form of godliness" even while denying the power of such godliness to transform their own lives (2Tim 3:5). In this they hope to appear righteous to others (cp Prov 16:2; 20:9).

Are we ever like this? Do we sometimes tell others, implicitly if not explicitly, "Keep away; don't come near me, for I am too sacred for you!" (Isa 65:5)? Are we ever like the Pharisee who went into the temple courts to pray, whose prayer began with: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this poor fellow standing here beside me!" (Luke 18:11)?

We should not forget that the Greek word for "hypocrite" (transliterated directly into English) described in the first place a stage actor, playing a part for his audience. The actor on the stage may have no qualities or character traits in common with the character he is portraying. He may be the worst kind of scoundrel who is simply acting the part of a saintly person. Or he may be an exemplary individual portraying a mass murderer.

Are we ever stage actors? Do we ever fall into the trap of pretending to be what we know we are not, for the sake of pleasing or deceiving others? If so, then, in the words of Jesus, we may be like "whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean" (Matt 23:27). He also said of such men: "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight" (Luke 16:15).

The sad fact is that self-deception can never cleanse. It can only continue to assert what is false; it can do nothing to make that assertion true. It will try to cover its 'stench' with a cloud of perfume, all to no avail. But the ones who remain on this self-deceiving course will continue to go wrong until it is too late to go right. The time will come when the one who is "vile" or "filthy" will remain so by a decree infinitely greater than his own conscience, and with no more remedy, even to the end of time (Rev 22:11). The only safe course, when confronted with one's own moral filth, is — like the tax collector of Jesus's parable — to beat upon the breast and say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

#3. *Those whose eyes are ever so haughty, whose glances are so disdainful:* Seeing themselves as "pure", they must see others as not quite up to the same standard. The proverb emphasizes the eyes because the glance or look is the most immediate evidence of their contempt for others. These men are wise in their own eyes, when in reality they have less hope than fools (Prov 26:12). "Haughty" is the Hebrew "ram", to be high or lifted up, in pride; the KJV captures the intensity of the phrase with an exclamation: "O how lofty are their eyes!"

“Disdainful” is a different word, “nasa” (to lift up), but with the same effect. This haughtiness leads to a corresponding contempt, or disdain, for those whom they see as ‘beneath’ them (Prov 6:17; 21:4). In English, the same thought is conveyed as having one’s nose in the air, or looking down one’s nose at others (cf Isa 3:16).

We may see this lofty, blind pride, as Bridges points out, in:

- the worldly greatness (and blindness) of Moab (Isa 16:6; Jer 28:29);
- the pride of the prince of Tyre (Ezek 28:2);
- the boasting of Antiochus (Dan 11:36);
- the self-glorifying ostentation of Haman (Esth 5:11);
- the self-satisfied contemplation of Nebuchadnezzar admiring his own works, before the severe chastening of God had taught him the wholesome lesson: “Those who walk in pride he is able to humble” (Dan 4:37);
- the striking apparel and blasphemous posing of Herod (Acts 12:21); and
- the remarkable hubris of the “man of sin”, sitting in God’s temple and proclaiming himself to be God (2Thes 2:4).

The words in this verse drip with irony. Catching this spirit, Matthew Henry writes: “[Agur] speaks of them with amazement at their intolerable pride and insolence: ‘Oh how lofty are their eyes!’ With what disdain do they look upon their neighbors, as not worthy to be set with the dogs of their flock! What a distance do they expect everybody should keep; and, when they look upon themselves, how do they strut and vaunt like the peacock, thinking they make themselves illustrious when really they make themselves ridiculous! There is a generation of such, on whom He who resists the proud will pour contempt.”

#4. *Those whose teeth are swords and whose jaws are set with knives to devour the poor from the earth, the needy from among mankind:* “Swords” is the plural of “chereb”, a fairly common Hebrew word. In Proverbs it is used of a double-edged sword (Prov 5:4), the piercing of reckless words (Prov 12:18), and the words of a false witness against his neighbor (Prov 25:18).

The word for “jaws” is “metalléot”, referring to the jawbone, but with emphasis on biting and thus alluding to the teeth. Whenever the word appears, it is parallel to teeth: in two cases it refers to the jawbone of a lion (Joel 1:6; Psa 58:6, where the NIV translates “fangs”); in Job 29:17 it refers to the “fangs” of wicked men.

The word for “knives” is “ma’akhalot”, creating alliteration with the previous “metalléot”. “Ma’akhalot” refers to a large knife for carving meat, a butcher knife. Such a knife could be used for slaughtering an animal and dividing the body pieces, exactly the procedure used by the priests in the offering of sacrifices. Ironically, all four times the noun is used in the Bible (Gen 22:6, 10; Jdgs 19:29; and here) it describes or suggests the killing, dismembering, sacrificing and/or eating of human beings!

Although human, those who have teeth like swords, and butcher knives set in their jaws, have essentially become brute beasts, predators seeking whom they might attack and devour. They accomplish this by hateful words and cruel schemes, by false accusations, and/or by secret gossip and slander, seeking to damage the

reputations and destroy the spirits of others. Being predators, they are likely to go after those whom they see as weak, the poor and needy of this world, the ones least able to defend themselves, or having the least standing in society in the first place (Prov 31:8,9). In the words of Jesus, such men “devour widows’ houses” while making a show of lengthy prayers (Matt 23:14) — the actions of a “hypocrite”.

When the righteous Job remembers the times he “broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth” (Job 29:17), he is thinking of how he confronted such predatory men. David spoke of such men as “those who devour my people as men eat bread” (Psa 14:4) — i.e., these predators “devour” men as casually as other men eat bread! Micah spoke of those “who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones” (Mic 3:2,3; cp also Jer 5:17; 30:16).

That men and women can become like brute beasts, forgetting or never truly understanding what it means to be created in the image of God, is a great tragedy. Such people wreak havoc, by words and deeds, upon their fellows. This is why such passages as Psalm 49 remind us that the rich and those of high standing may be like the beasts that perish (vv 12, 20). It is also why the great prophecies of Daniel and Revelation picture the Gentile nations as predatory beasts.

By far the greatest tragedy is when, as this proverb implies, brothers and sisters of *Christ* go so far as to forget their privileged status in God’s family, and then bite and devour their own fellow believers. Alongside them the great beasts of prophetic image pale into insignificance:

“If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (Gal 5:15).

“For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be... I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder” (2Cor 12:20).

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” (James 4:1).

The final irony is that such men will find themselves, at the last, having to face the Son of God, who will truly have a sharp sword coming out of his mouth. That sword will be a sword of Divine power with which he will punish the wicked, smite the nations, and rule over God’s Kingdom (Rev 19:15,16; cp also Rev 1:16; Psa 2:9; 2Thes 2:8).

The sword-bearing Son of God will destroy these wicked, but he will at the same time reward and bless the righteous — those who have shown true heavenly wisdom and demonstrated their purity by being “peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere”. Such “peacemakers who sow in peace” will “raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:17,18).

“Proverbs are the daughters of experience” (African saying).

A proverb about books: “Dead men open living men’s eyes.”

(9) Tetrad Two:

Four things that are never satisfied (verses 15,16)

“The leech has two daughters. ‘Give! Give!’ they cry.

“There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, ‘Enough!’: the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, ‘Enough!’ ”

Thinking probably of Agur’s prayer in verses 8 and 9 and the implied warnings of verses 13 and 14, the always insightful Kidner writes: “The man of measureless ambition loses whatever luster remains to him after verse 14, in this hungry company [vv 15,16]. The implied comparison is first comic [v 15], then tragic [v 16]... [revealing] this craving as at once menacing (Sheol and fire) and pathetic (the childless and the parched), and the reader of the two verses is left with mingled repulsion, fear and pity for human cupidity [greed].”

The second of the six tetrads describes four insatiable things, things that are never satisfied with what has been given them. Even after they have received their ‘gifts’, they have nothing productive to show in return:

- 1) The grave in the universal sense, which is never full, but can always find room for one more corpse.
- 2) The barren womb, which may receive fertile seed time after time, but never produces fruit.
- 3) Barren, parched desert land, which, even when it receives water from heaven, cannot produce crops.
- 4) Fire, the most insatiable of all: when it has consumed what it has been given, it can always consume more, reducing all that comes within its power ashes.

There are actually *five* such things in this list, the two daughters of the leech being first, and most graphically illustrating the insatiable quality of the other four things. These bloodsuckers are never filled, but continually search for more victims which they can suck dry of their lifeblood. They take and take, only to consume, and then they want to take more; they take and take but never give back.

Some Bible scholars have noted links between these two verses and an ancient Sanskrit proverb: “Fire is never satisfied with fuel; nor the ocean with rivers; nor death with all creatures; nor bright-eyed women with men.”

The etymology of the Hebrew word “alukah” (“leech” in the NIV and RSV, “horse-leach” in the KJV) is doubtful, and understandably so because it only occurs this one time in the Old Testament. This may nevertheless be an accurate translation, for earlier Jews and later linguists alike have accepted it. Besides this, the leech is just about the best imaginable symbol of voracious, rapacious, and all-encompassing lust and greed — outside the world of humans at least (cp Eccl 5:10; Jer 5:8).

Because of its obscurity, some have thought “alukah” might be a proper name, either of a place or a person. In *The Land and the Book*, written in the 1850s, the minister and explorer W.M. Thomson writes of visiting “the ruined villages of Em

el' Aluk and Muallukah", and says that both names are suggestive of the Hebrew word for "horseleach" ("alukah"). According to him, leeches abounded in that area — the marshes of Zoar, on the south side of the Dead Sea.

Some early Jewish traditions picture "Alukah" as a mysterious figure, a bloodthirsty ghost or demon. We may laugh at the gullible foolishness of an earlier age, until we realize that — even today — many are fascinated with legends of Dracula and other vampires, and read books, watch television programs, and flock to movies about them.

According to the rabbis, the leech sucks blood through its two suckers (called its "two daughters"), one at each end of its body. These suckers are like greedy children, clamoring: "Give! Give! ['hab hab']". They are never satisfied ("saba": filled or satiated).

"There may be some fascination for us," writes Schultz, "in the picture of a shark or a tiger, but the leech only invokes revulsion in us." He may be correct in general, although the previously mentioned vampire books, and movies suggest this isn't altogether true.

Schultz continues: "The insatiable hunger and thirst depicted in these verses is 'hell' at its worst. Yet, these verses give a description of human greed, not of demons. They depict what man, the crown of God's creation, has become in his separation from God."

"Give! Give!": The Hebrew word here is quite common, but the repetition — without any 'please' or equivalent preamble — suggests the intensity of a demand rather than a polite request. The Bible has other occurrences of this same root word as a command, with the same apparent intensity:

- Rachel begging for children from her husband Jacob (Gen 30:1);
- the starving people of Egypt, begging Joseph and Pharaoh for food (Gen 47:15,16); and
- Caleb's daughter Achsah begging her father for springs of water (Jdgs 1:15).

Kidner suggests that "Give! Give!" may be read as the names of the two "daughters" or suckers, more than simply as their cries. In other words, they are identical twins, made of the same stuff as their mother, that is, other people's blood.

Bridges quotes an old preacher, Sanderson: "The horseleach has but two daughters. But we have, I know not how many craving lusts, no less importunately clamorous than they; till they be served, incessantly crying, 'Give, give'; but much more unsatisfied than they. For the horseleaches will be filled in time, and when they are filled, they tumble off, and there is an end. But our lusts will never be satisfied. Like Pharaoh's cattle, when they have eaten up all the fat ones, they are still as hungry and as whining as they were before [Gen 41:21]."

To this Bridges adds his own comment: "How blessed then is the state, to which the gospel brings us: 'Having food and raiment, let us be therewith content!' What a merciful deliverance from that 'destruction and perdition' which is the certain end of lawless lust (1Tim 6:6-10)."

#1. The grave: The grave is all-consuming but never full. In Ecclesiastes the Preacher echoes this: “All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full” (Eccl 1:7). He sees a wearisome sameness and monotony about the world: “The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing” (v 8). Birth finds its way to death, rain to the sea and back again to the clouds. Men accumulate wealth, they die, the wealth passes to others who also die, and the cycle continues. Never do these cycles reach their conclusions.

Likewise, Agur notes that all people eventually make their way into the grave, yet after untold generations the grave is not full, and still the bodies keep coming. Shakespeare captures this point in the words of Macbeth:

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time.
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.”

Altogether too dismal a topic for polite company, but indisputably true nonetheless.

The Hebrew “sheol” is generally translated “hell” in the KJV, but “grave” in the NIV, which is a great improvement. Literally, it means “the hidden, or covered place”, and refers to the place where the dead are hidden away (e.g., Prov 1:12; 5:5; 7:27; 9:18).

Twice in Proverbs and once in Job, “sheol” is coupled with “abaddon” or its variant “abbadoh”; these words signify destruction (Prov 15:11; 27:20; Job 26:6). “Destruction” (“abaddon”) and “death” (“maveth”, or “muwth”) occur together in Job 28:22 and Psalm 88:10,11. In all these cases the intention is the same: to picture the death-state, a place where the dead are hidden away, and destroyed (cp Psa 88:10).

In this tetrad, the grave is paired with fire, the symbol of destruction. In effect they are, respectively, the Old Testament “sheol” (the grave) and the New Testament “gehenna” (the “everlasting fire” of judgment, symbolized by the garbage dump in Gehenna (Matt 5:22,29,30; Mark 9:43,45,47; etc), or the valley of Hinnom (Jer 7:31,32; 19:6; 32:35; cp Isa 66:24). The cold grave and the burning fire are two like symbols of the same never-ending destruction. One turns what it is given into dust quite slowly, and the other into ashes very quickly, but the final result is exactly the same.

Like the leech’s “daughters” craving their victims’ blood, the grave (“sheol”) is pictured as craving the whole corpses of its victims. What is actually a place of darkness and nothingness (cp Job 14:20-22; 17:13; 18:17,18) is here personified as a ravenous beast, with an insatiable hunger to be fed, over and over again. Some commentators point out similar imagery in Canaanite mythology, where Death is deified as one who opens wide the mouth to swallow its victims (J.C.L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, pp 68,69). It may well be that God’s inspired prophets consciously echo this language, to the extent it states the truth about the grave. On the other hand, it may be that even ancient Canaanite legends echo Bible teachings.

To these references to “sheol” we add Proverbs 27:20:

“Sheol and abaddon [the grave and destruction] are never satisfied [‘saba’, the same word as in Prov 30:15,16], and neither are the eyes of man.”

We also add Isaiah 5:14:

“The grave [‘sheol’] enlarges its appetite and opens its mouth without limit.”

And finally there is Habakkuk 2:5, where the greedy, power-mad man, like “the grave [‘sheol’ again] and like death, is never satisfied [‘saba’ again].” Also compare Psalms 49:14; 89:48; 141:7; and Proverbs 1:12.

A few names will suffice to illustrate the worst of the human element symbolized by the insatiable grave — those greedy, ruthless, and seemingly amoral consumers of human life: Alexander the Great, Herod the Great (why are such men called “great”?), Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein. The relentless Sennacherib. The harlot of Revelation, drunken with the blood of saints and martyrs. Where to stop?

#2. The barren womb: Literally, the womb that is closed. The grave, the barren land, and fire are all metaphors for the woman with the barren womb. Like the leech, she has an insatiable desire; her desire to have children burns within her like a fire, but is never extinguished. She always wants what she cannot have. Her desires inevitably end in more feelings of frustration; she is pursuing a mirage across a desert. Her womb is as dead as the grave itself.

It must be noted here that, in Israel (and in the Jewish culture), a married woman who could not have children was an object of pity, and quite possibly felt her own quiet or outspoken desperation for the fulfillment of motherhood. Rachel, Hannah and Elizabeth come to mind (cf Gen 30:1,2; Ruth 1:11-13,20,21; 1Sam 1:6,10,11; 2Kgs 4:14; Luke 1:25). This is understandable to us because we believe in the Hope of Israel. Thus we appreciate the great promises of a Seed to come, and the hope for future generations who will fulfill God’s will, which lies at the heart of Old Testament revelation.

In the same Scriptures, it is invariably the LORD, and not a medical condition, which causes the opening and closing of the womb (Gen 16:2; 20:17,18; 30:1,2; Deut 7:13,14; 1Sam 1:5,6; Isa 66:9). While rational minds may look for scientific explanations, which are certainly true on one level, the most profound truth behind all human experience is that God is in control. However unsatisfying to our pride, it is He who decides ultimately what will happen and what will not happen with and to His creation. It must be added, also, that it is the LORD alone who can bring blessing out of what seems the most grievous chastening or deprivation (Heb 12:5-13; Prov 3:11,12).

#3. Land, which is never satisfied with water: Desert lands — dry, parched lands — and those with certain soils may receive rain from heaven but be unable to put it to productive use. The water soaks in and accumulates in underground reservoirs while not fertilizing the earth above, or it runs off rapidly into streams and rivers. Jesus describes such land in his parable of the sower and the good seed (Matt 13; Mark 4): rocky places, where there is not much earth, and the beaten-down,

well-packed earth of paths and roads, from which rain simply runs off. In such land, nothing useful can take root and grow; the land itself remains impervious, or barren, to the life-giving influences of seed and rain and sun.

In the same way, as Jesus says, there are types of minds which cannot receive (or which choose not to receive) the seed of life. These minds shrug off the divine gifts that fall upon them, and remain crusted over, hard and unyielding to the potential that comes their way. Never satisfied with the water, or the implanted seed, of life, such minds remain “barren and unfruitful” (2Pet 1:8, KJV), or “ineffective and unproductive” (NIV). In other words, the word of life cannot penetrate the surface and take root, and can never produce the “fruit of the Spirit... love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance” (Gal 5:22,23).

#4. And fire, which never says, “Enough!”: Fire is the strongest figure of speech for absolute and complete destruction. The prophet Isaiah (in Isa 9:18-21) speaks of wickedness burning like a fire:

“[Wickedness] consumes briers and thorns, it sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke.”

Such fire, Isaiah adds, may have been set in motion, or at least allowed, by the LORD Himself: by His wrath, Isaiah says:

“The land will be scorched and the people will be fuel for the fire; no one will spare his brother. On the right they will devour, but still be hungry; on the left they will eat, but not be satisfied. Each will feed on the flesh of his own offspring [or ‘the flesh of his own arm’].”

Indeed, the people of Israel will turn against their brothers, burning and devouring one another:

“Manasseh will feed on Ephraim, and Ephraim on Manasseh; together they will turn against Judah”.

The lesson here is twofold: Firstly, man may be consumed by his own wickedness while he in turn goes about consuming others on the altar of his greed, his sexual desires, or his hatred. It is certain he will never be satisfied with one more questionable business deal, one more lover, or one more cruel act. For him, the burning fires have no end so long as he seeks to satisfy them.

Secondly, God’s vengeance upon those who indulge their natural appetites, and can never turn from them, will also burn like a fire: “The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark; both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire” (Isa 1:31). “Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them” (Mal 4:1). Likewise, James says that the evil tongue that spreads the fire of hatred and vengeance will burn without remorse until it is itself consumed by Gehenna (James 3:6).

Gehenna, the fire of divine judgment which the LORD starts burning, will have a satisfying conclusion, but not before all its available fuel is consumed. God's fire is a fire of justice, a righteous fire that will destroy wickedness in all its aspects. When its work is finished, then the LORD Himself will be able to say, "Enough!" Then His glory will fill the earth, which will then have been finally purged of its sinful, destructive elements.

(10)The punishment for disrespecting one's parents (verse 17)

"The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures."

As with verse 10, this verse appears to be a stand-alone proverb among the other sections of Proverbs 30. But its subject matter and its verbal connections with some of the tetrads demonstrate that it is an integral part of the proverbs of Agur.

Severe punishment awaits those who show disrespect for their parents (see references, v 11). The sentence focuses on the "eye" that shows mocking ("la'ag") and scorn or disdain ("buwz") against parents. The eye, that is, the look or facial expression, manifests the inner attitude of the heart. Here is literally the judgment of "an eye for an eye" (Matt 5:38; Exod 21:23-25; Lev 24:19,20; Deut 19:19): the eye that despises or shows contempt for parents will be pecked out by the birds.

The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother: This phrase is an echo of verse 11: those who curse their parents are one of the classes of people whom the LORD will surely judge, and now what follows in verse 17 is a graphic illustration of such judgment.

The concentration on the "eye" has another verbal link, this time with verse 13, which describes the haughty and disdainful eyes or glances of another class of arrogant people.

Under the Law, those who abused their parents were put to death (Exod 21:17; Lev 20:9; Matt 15:4; cf Prov 13:9; 20:20; Job 18:6). Since vultures normally devour the dead (2Sam 21:10; 1Kgs 14:11; 21:24; Psa 79:2; Jer 7:33; 16:4; Matt 24:28; Luke 17:37), the meaning may be that the body of a disgraceful son would lie unburied and exposed (2Kgs 9:10, 37; Psa 83:10; Isa 5:25; Jer 8:1-3; 9:22; 14:16; 25:33; 36:30).

Leaving a corpse exposed to the elements and wild beasts was then (and always has been) the height of indignity, and a terribly gruesome final judgment. The imagery here is as ugly and disconcerting as that of the grotesque, greedy leech in verse 15. Agur plainly intended that his listeners or readers would be revolted by such mental pictures, and would transfer that revulsion from the punishment itself to the sins that brought about such a punishment.

We can see several plain connections between this verse and earlier verses in Proverbs 30. It is interesting that the connections can be drawn to different tetrads:

- The sin to be judged links verse 17 with at least two of the four facets of arrogance in Tetrad One (vv 11-14) — the “parents” in verse 11 and the “eyes” in verse 13.
- The revolting image of vultures pecking out the eyes of a lifeless body points back to the equally revolting leech that introduced Tetrad Two (vv 15,16).

This last observation suggests that verse 17 is meant to be a kind of conclusion to both previous tetrads:

- It provides a judgment implied but not explicitly stated for the classes of people enumerated in Tetrad One, and
- it shows a punishment disgusting enough to fit the equally disgusting sins — greed, lust and selfishness — listed in Tetrad Two.

The verse refers to “the ravens of the valley”. Does “the valley” refer to the Valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna, the scene of judgment (Jer 31:40)? See the notes and references above, on verse 16, and the relationship between “Sheol” and “Gehenna”.

Or does it refer to “the valley of the shadow of death” (Psa 23:4), the valley where Elijah had the prophets of Baal slaughtered (1Kgs 18:40), or some other valley?

(11) Tetrad Three: Four amazing things (verses 18,19), and one more amazing thing (verse 20)

“There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden.

“This is the way of an adulteress: She eats and wipes her mouth and says, ‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’”

Many things in nature are amazing but incomprehensible. The adjective “amazing” (“pala”) basically describes what inspires wonder or awe, but not necessarily what is good or admirable in a moral sense. This last point needs to be kept in mind as we consider these “wonders” of nature. The verb for “do not understand” (the negative of “yada”, to know) describes what is unknowable or incomprehensible.

The wise man Agur can only observe with awe the wonders of nature; he is at a loss to explain them all. Observant and wise as he is (v 1), he must confess that he is but a brute beast (vv 2-4) when it comes to truly knowing *how* the LORD has made certain things as they are, and *why* those things act as they do.

We should have seen by now that there can be riddles embedded in the proverbs of Agur, and there is plainly one here. If we are to understand, then we need to ask the proper question: ‘What do these four things have in common?’

As we begin, we ought to do two things:

- 1) First, we should note the fact that the four things in verse 19 are all linked by the use of the word “way”. This translates the Hebrew “derek”, meaning literally a road or path, but metaphorically a course of action in general. It is how

they do what they do and how those four described actions are alike that will lead us to an understanding of Agur's third tetrad.

- 2) Secondly, we must note that the first four are also closely linked with the fifth “wonderful” thing, in verse 20: “This is the way [‘derek’ for the fifth time] of an adulteress!” There is “wonder” in this fifth thing, truly, but it ought to be the wonder of disgust and revulsion, akin to what we felt when contemplating leeches (v 15) and vultures (v 17) — in their own unique ways consuming human beings.

So now it should be obvious that the right question is: ‘What do these *five* things (not just the first four things) have in common?’ And also that we should start with some preliminary questions: ‘What is the *way* (the path or course) that is described in each case?’ And then, ‘What does the *way* in each case have in common with all the others?’ Answer this riddle, and we should be on our way to understanding the lesson that God was teaching Agur, and that Agur wants in turn to teach us. So we must examine Proverbs 30:20 at this point, and not leave it until later.

Verse 20

This is the way of an adulteress: She eats and wipes her mouth and says, “I’ve done nothing wrong”: Should the student and expositor deal with this verse, or tiptoe around it? Should he use precise language, or resort to euphemisms? It is plain that verse 20 is the key to understanding verses 18 and 19; it cannot be avoided. However, we can still be prudent about the words we use, while assuming the language will be plain enough to get the message across.

It would be ridiculous in the extreme to think that what the adulterous woman physically consumes, that is, what she puts in her actual mouth, concerns the wise man Agur here. There is, however, a sufficient likeness between two very different actions by the adulteress that allows Agur to speak of the one action, and trust that his listeners or readers will readily make the connection to the other action — which he refuses, presumably out of propriety, to speak of in precise detail.

We shall speak this plainly enough, it is hoped: The imagery of the woman eating and then wiping her mouth when finished is a euphemism for enjoying illicit sexual relations and then washing herself afterward, so as to leave no external evidence of her sin.

The truly wonderful or amazing thing (but most certainly not in a good or pleasant sense) is this: A woman on a strict diet can consume a forbidden dessert, wipe her mouth afterwards, and then tell herself, ‘I didn’t eat anything.’ Quite an act of self-deception, but a relatively minor one. In like fashion, the practiced adulteress can engage in a morally reprehensible act, nonchalantly wipe away all telltale signs of that abominable sin after she is finished, and then tell herself, ‘I never committed adultery.’ To her the act of adultery is as unremarkable as having a meal, so far as she destroyed what is left of her conscience.

Earlier proverbs have used similar euphemisms to describe illicit sexual relations, ones that prostitute the marriage relationship:

At the end of Proverbs 5, which has warned the young man of the dangers of sexual promiscuity, the lesson is summarized in these words:

“Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth” (vv 15-18).

Here, in an elaborate allegory, the images of a cistern, well or fountain are used for the man’s wife (an example of similar language is found in Song 4:15). She is ordained by God to satisfy his sexual desires, like clear, clean water satisfies thirst, even as he is ordained to satisfy her desires. The apostle Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 7:2-5.

Thus, by euphemism, these verses teach that a man should find sexual fulfillment in his wife only (i.e., “Drink waters from your own cistern”). Otherwise, his ‘waters’ (her own sexual favors) may flow out into the streets for anyone and everyone to enjoy. She may turn to other men for sex (in the language of Proverbs, sharing her ‘waters’ with strangers) due to his unfaithfulness or neglect. So in verse 15 the ‘waters’ of one’s own ‘cistern’ signify the legitimate joys of pure marital relations; but in verse 16 the ‘waters’ that ‘overflow in the streets’ and ‘the public squares’ signify illicit sexual pleasures indulged in outside of marriage.

The same figure of speech, seen from the other perspective, appears in Proverbs 9:17,18. There the young man who is tempted to stray into sinful liaisons is warned:

“Stolen water is sweet... But little do they know [i.e., those who ‘steal’ such ‘waters’] that the dead are there.”

In effect, he is told that the man who has sex with an adulteress or a prostitute is drinking from a ‘poisoned well’. It is in fact the bloated and putrefying corpses of previous victims, scattered all around him, that smell so ‘sweet’, if he will only open his eyes and see them! In the end the ‘waters’ that poisoned them will poison him too.

In both these cases, it is drink and not food that represents the stolen, secretly enjoyed sexual pleasure being consumed by the sinner. Nevertheless, the points, lessons and warnings are the same.

The totally self-deceiving adulteress is the most odious and revolting image we have seen, or that we will see, in the proverbs of Agur. More repulsive than sucking leeches bloated with blood. Uglier than vultures pecking out the eyes of rotting corpses (perhaps like the ones around the poisoned well mentioned above). This needs to be added, though: If, somehow, we are *not* absolutely disgusted with this last detestable picture, even more than with ghoulish leeches and carrion-feeding vultures, then it must be because we have allowed our own consciences to become seared — if not by what we have done, then by what we have seen or read! If so, then we really ought to think about that seriously, and seek help from the Scriptures and righteous advisers as to the remedy, before it is too late.

With this background of verse 20 in our minds, we can now outline Tetrad Three (vv 18,19), along with its appendix (v 20). There are four (and even five) amazing, incomprehensible things:

- 3) an eagle flying across the sky;
- 4) a snake slithering across the rock;
- 5) a ship coursing its way through the sea;
- 6) a man having his “way” with a maiden; and
- 7) an adulteress, hardened in her sin, hiding the evidence of that sin, and then brazenly lying to herself (and to her husband?).

Perhaps now we are better prepared to answer the question posed by Agur’s riddle: ‘What do these **five** things have in common?’ Obviously, it is the “way” (the course of action) each follows.

‘How are the “ways” alike?’

The first three things are easy: Plainly, they are “wonderful” in that God has created them all, and made them in a certain way, so that they do certain things by instinct, or act in a certain way by the laws of nature. (He did not make the ship, at least directly, but He did create water, and thus the seas, to possess certain physical properties.) But the “amazing” part, the part that is more difficult to understand, with which we wrestle now, is this: ***they all, the first three for certain, leave no trail giving clues of their “way” after they have gone past:***

- 1) Birds flying through the air leave no trace in the sky to follow. (Nobody in Agur’s day had seen the vapor trails of supersonic jets!)
- 2) Snakes making their way across sand or dirt may leave distinctive trails, but not when they travel across the rock.
- 3) A small boat traversing a pond or lake will leave ripples in its wake, briefly, but the wake of a ship in the sea is gone as soon as the ship passes.

We now come to the fourth amazing, incomprehensible thing. It must be admitted that, taken alone, there is an ambiguity about “the way of a man with a maid”. It may seem like a mysterious and wonderful thing in the most innocent of ways: the stirrings of feelings in a young man, and in a young woman, pleasant but a bit unsettling, and the exploring of tenderness between them, with the hope of developing a relationship. Something to be cherished and protected until it can be enjoyed, as the LORD intended, within the sanctifying bonds of marriage. That is a “way” to be contemplated with godly wonder and admiration, for the Creator made us as we are, and wants us to enjoy the righteous and godly pleasures He has created as a part of human nature, in their rightful place. And so the phrase “the way of a man with a maid” may produce in us some truly wonderful, positive and inspiring thoughts.

Based on the context, however, that’s not what is being described here, at least in the sense that is most to the point. What we have here, as the fifth “amazing” thing makes abundantly clear, is something very different: *It is an immoral corruption of the process that God intended.* The hardened adulteress or prostitute (#5 in our list of five things) may bear a superficial likeness to the loving and faithful wife in some

of her actions. But in a moral sense, and as seen through the eyes of God, she is a gruesome parody, a chilling travesty, an especially vile caricature of the true wife.

Thus, for our purposes here, we must consider #4 in our list (the way of the “*man with the maid*”) in the same way, as the secret seductive way of the wolf on the prowl, the man greedy for sexual pleasure, but with no real love or concern for the object of his desire as a person; the man who is willing to use all the tricks in his arsenal, and make all the lying promises he can think of, in order to have his “way” with her.

If that characterization seems overdone, then we can perhaps say this much on his behalf: perhaps the man didn’t start out in his first relationship with such a selfish, cold-blooded frame of mind. Maybe he only evolved into a predatory creature over time as he discovered how easy, and how superficially satisfying, it was to “love ‘em and leave ‘em”.

Additional comments on Proverbs 30:18-20

There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand:

The Hebrew “*pala*”, translated “amazing” or “wonderful” (KJV), occurs quite a few times. Some of its occurrences are quite interesting, given its context here in Proverbs 30:

- a) The angel, who came to Abraham and Sarah on behalf of the LORD, to tell them they would yet have a son, asked: “Is anything too hard [*pala*] for the LORD?” (Gen 18:14).
- b) The angel who appeared to the parents of Samson was pressed by Manoah to reveal his name. The angel replied: “Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding” (NIV) — or, “seeing it is secret” (KJV) (Jdgs 13:18). The word describing the angel’s name, i.e., his purpose (or perhaps his actual name?) is “*pala*”.
- c) The psalmist makes a number of observations about the omniscience of the LORD, and then remarks: “Such knowledge is too wonderful [*pala*] for me” (Psa 139:6).
- d) Addressing the LORD, the psalmist then says: “You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully [*pala*] made; your works are wonderful [*pala* again], I know that full well” (Psa 139:13,14).
- e) We also find “*Pala*” in the titles (or perhaps the one extended title) given to Hezekiah and/or the coming Messiah in Isaiah 9:6. According to the NIV, it is: “Wonderful [*pala*] Counselor [the same phrase appears in Isa 28:29 also], Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Yet again, there are other passages using the same word that describe other things eliciting wonder and amazement, but which are far from positive or righteous:

- f) Jeremiah sees Jerusalem as an unclean, adulterous woman: “Her filthiness clung to her skirts”; she had corrupted her ways with the LORD. The prophet also saw that the LORD brought her low, and that “her fall”, from grace and into slavery, “was astounding [*pala*]” (Lam 1:9).

g) The great Gentile king and oppressor of Israel, described in Daniel 11:36, will exalt himself against all authorities, and will speak “unheard-of” (“pala”, “marvelous” in KJV) things against God, yet at last “will come to his end, and no one will help him” (v 45). Here, the amazingly blasphemous things spoken *against* God lead to the king’s fall, which (we may suppose) will be amazing also.

The way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas: In addition to the “way” in each case being untraceable, other common themes of the “way” (for the first three things at least) have been suggested, including the following:

- All the first three things are hidden from continued observation, and are somewhat majestic (cp vv 29-31 for other things that are “stately in their stride”, or “which go well”).
- All three have a mysterious means of propulsion: an eagle soaring with sometimes no apparent movement, relying on the wind and thermal currents; a snake moving quite efficiently without legs or feet; and a ship sailing magnificently on the wind.
- All three describe the movement of one thing within the sphere or domain of another: an eagle moving through God’s heavens; a serpent across a rock, where it seemingly has no traction; and a ship bearing humans across water, a potentially dangerous place for them.

The issue, however, is not just with the first three things on the list. It must also be with the fourth and fifth things: how do any of these three suggestions relate particularly to the fourth and fifth things, when we move from the animal or inanimate spheres into the world of humans? The answer would seem to be: none work very well, nor do they provide logical connections with the fourth and fifth descriptions (at least in this writer’s estimation). This leaves us with the thought expressed earlier, i.e., that ***all these “ways” — all five of them — are untraceable after the fact.***

#1. *The way of an eagle in the sky:* Compare the wonder in the language of Job 39:27; Jeremiah 48:40; 49:22. It really ought to be noted, however, that (while we might prefer to think of a majestic eagle here) the Hebrew word translated “vulture” in Proverbs 30:17 (“neshar”) is the same word translated “eagle” here. In fact, “neshar” appears about 28 times in the Old Testament, and the precise identification of the bird intended can only be determined, and not always perfectly, by the context in each case.

Is there a lesson here? Perhaps it is this: We should always be on guard spiritually, and not presume that all things are truly as they first appear — that is, that every bird which soars effortlessly through the clouds is an ‘eagle’. Some might be ‘vultures’. *Caveat emptor!*

#2. *The way of a snake on a rock:* Bearing in mind the fourth and fifth things in this group, the snake is, for obvious reasons as old as Eden, also the symbol of temptation or seduction leading to sin. It is not much of a stretch to see the “way” of the Edenic serpent to be similar to the “way” of the man with the maiden, and the “way” of the adulterous woman.

#3. *The way of a ship on the high seas:* Other passages that speak of seafaring ships, perhaps with a touch of wonder, are Psalms 104:25,26; 107:23; and Ezekiel 27:9.

Seafaring vessels, it should be noted also, are not always up to good. Some carry pirates, or cruel invading forces.

#4. *And the way of a man with a maiden:* As we have seen, this describes a man's seduction of a young woman, his victim. Such seduction requires certain skills (a "way" of doing a thing). It is evil. It can be consummated quickly. It is ultimately useless and unsatisfying. It leaves nothing of real profit. It may, however, leave in its wake sad lessons ruefully learned, and at a terrible price.

Nevertheless, it has this in its favor, from the predatory male's perspective: His "way" is hidden, just like the way of the eagle in the sky, the snake on a rock, and the ship on the sea. His seductive ways leave no trail behind. Probably the young woman is too ashamed to speak of his "way" with her either; and if necessary he can deny his involvement altogether. Finally, if a pregnancy does not result, no one seems to be any the worse for the experience. From his selfish perspective, all can go back to normal as though it never happened, and he can move on, unfettered, to another enjoyable pursuit. In his shortsighted, selfish view, life couldn't be better!

With a maiden: The term "almah" describes a young woman who is sexually ready for marriage, and presumably (though not certainly) a virgin.

The Hebrew preposition "be" (translated as "with" here) could mean that, most literally, the "way of a man" is either "with" or "in" the "almah". This "in" suggests an intimacy and a oneness, either of spirit or flesh. It is a beautiful sort of "wonder" when love between a young man and a young woman achieves an intimacy and unity of heart and mind in the marriage relationship, and the conception and birth of children. It is quite another, and not nearly so lovely, when the "way" of the man leads to an intimacy, but only in the flesh, with the young girl. Then there is no oneness of spirit, but only a fleeting gratification for him, and a resultant feeling of loss, hurt and betrayal for her. Sadly, the second of these is the "way" Agur has in mind here, as stated earlier.

The 18th-century commentator Matthew Henry saw the same "wonder" here: "By what pretensions and protestations of love, and all its powerful charms, promises of marriage, assurances of secrecy and reward, is many an unwary virgin brought to sell her virtue, and honor, and peace, and soul, and all to a base traitor; for so all sinful lust is in the kingdom of love. The more artfully the temptation is managed, the more watchful and resolute ought every pure heart to be against it."

#5. *This is the way of an adulteress:* Adam Clarke quotes an even earlier Bible expositor, named Holden, who relates the way of the adulteress to the four previous "wonderful" things. The language is old-fashioned, but powerful: "The adulterous woman goes about in search of her deluded victim, as the eagle takes its flight into the air to spy out its prey. She uses every species of blandishment and insinuation to allure and beguile, as the serpent employs its windings and sinuous motions to pass along the rocks; she pursues a course surrounded with danger, as a ship in the midst of the sea is continually exposed to the fury of the tempest, and the

hazard of shipwreck; and she tries every means, and exercises all her sagacity, to prevent the discovery of her illicit enjoyments, as a man attempts to conceal his clandestine intercourse with a maid. Such is the conduct of a lewd woman, marked by specious dissimulation and traitorous blandishment; she eateth and wipeth her mouth — she indulges her adulterous lust, yet artfully endeavors to conceal it, and with unblushing countenance asserts her innocence, exclaiming, ‘I have done no wickedness.’”

She eats and wipes her mouth: Here the “mouth” is a euphemism for the female organs of reproduction, as it plainly is in Proverbs 22:14:

“The mouth of an adulteress is a deep pit; he who is under the LORD’s wrath will fall into it.”

Proverbs 23:27 uses similar language:

“A prostitute is a deep pit and a wayward wife is a narrow well.”

Sexual intercourse with such a woman can be a fatal trap, like a hidden pit that catches unsuspecting animals, which hunters then kill. The sexually promiscuous man can fall into the trap of the seductive woman in so many different ways:

- the revenge of a wronged husband,
- the punishment of the law,
- the destruction of his own family,
- the censure of all proper society,
- the loss of his money and property,
- the blackmail of an unscrupulous woman or some observer, or
- a potentially fatal sexually-transmitted disease.

If all these fail to finish him off, he may still have begun a life of easy sexual pleasure from which he cannot or will not escape, a life of sin that will ultimately bring him before the divine judgment seat to suffer the final consequences of his sins.

And says, “I’ve done nothing wrong”: This sounds like an abbreviated version of what the would-be adulteress, Potiphar’s wife, told her husband. When her carefully contrived seduction of Joseph failed totally (Gen 39:6-13), she protested her innocence to the household servants: “Look, this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house” (vv 14,15). (Servants generally know something of their mistress’s character, and they probably didn’t believe her story.)

Then, when Potiphar returned home, she showed him the “evidence” of Joseph’s garment, and also told him the same story (vv 17,18), professing her innocence: “This is how your slave treated me” (v 19). (He probably didn’t believe her either.)

The endless cycle, and the slippery slope

One final comment arises from the use of “derek” (path, way) in the fourth and the fifth things. Each item has two components: the male and the female. In the former, it is the male who acts, who makes his “way”, with the young female. In the

latter, it is the female whose “way” is described. In each case, the “way” involves the sexual act, but with very different intents, expectations and attitudes.

When the two things are compared, we are “amazed” to see what is essentially the same action — sexual intercourse — but with a world of difference. For the young woman (the maid in verse 19), there must have been at least some hope and belief that what she was undertaking would have real meaning: that is, that the intimacy, even if others might see it as wrong, would be the beginning of a true and lasting love. However, her early hope led only to a bitter disappointment (as it does so often when we naïvely hope that bad means will lead to a good end).

The true “wonder” in setting these two things side by side is that the young woman could, over time and by degrees, become the willful adulteress (in verse 20). Every adulteress has to start somewhere! The further “wonder” is that, finally, the adulterous woman could prostitute her God-given sexuality for a moment’s pleasure, and then without blinking or blushing convince herself that she had done nothing wrong.

Thus these last two “wonderful things” suggest an ongoing cycle, repeated endlessly throughout history:

- 1) The experienced man woos, and misuses, the naïve girl.
- 2) The no-longer innocent girl, now grown up to womanhood, becomes the predator in turn, enticing, for money or entertainment, some innocent young man into sin.
- 3) This young man, no longer “innocent” himself, uses his new-found skills, or “way”, to entrap another woman — this one young and innocent — in order to gratify himself.
- 4) Etcetera, etcetera. So the cycle continues. For “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9). Or ‘in the shadows’, for that matter!

The truly “amazing” thing is that, by gradual steps, the relative purity of youth could degenerate into the hardened amorality of adulthood, all in the same human being who possessed the divinely implanted potential to glorify her Maker (or *his* Maker, as the above cycle makes clear). And it isn’t confined to adultery and those who commit it. Such is the deceitfulness of the sinful human heart (Jer 17:9; Rom 7:11; Eph 4:22; Heb 3:13; James 1:14), that every new indiscretion can give birth to new methods of justifying it. Finally — as the “way” turns into a slippery slope, and the slide down that slope accelerates — the sinner contrives to blot out the sin altogether by a self-induced hypnosis (“I’ve done nothing wrong”). Such is the “way” of human nature, and what a pathetically sad “wonder” it is!

“The glory of Proverbs is the conviction that, despite all appearances to the contrary, this world is God’s world, and not the world of wicked men. However the ‘tabernacles of robbers’ may prosper for a while, in the long run this world will prove itself to be God’s. Being so, then it must be well in the end with the doer of the right, the speaker of the truth, and ill with those who forsake these” (R.C. Trench).

(12) Tetrad Four: Four unbearable things (verses 21-23)

“Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food, an unloved woman who is married, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress.”

Certain people who are suddenly lifted to a higher status in life can be intolerable. The wise man Agur says that under these things the earth trembles and cannot bear it (v 21). Upheavals in the proper order of things make life unbearable.

For each of these four unbearable things, there is a very obvious and significant Bible example, the detailed study of which will surely repay the student. (It is not too difficult to think of other examples also.) The four unbearable things are:

- 1) ‘A servant when he becomes king’: Among others, but perhaps most significant, is Jeroboam the son of Nebat (1Kgs 11; 12), whose promotion led to the division of the Kingdom of God, which lasted for hundreds of years.
- 2) ‘A fool when he is full of food’: Nabal, the husband of Abigail, and the troubler of David (1Sam 25).
- 3) ‘An unloved woman when she is married’: Leah the older sister of Rachel, married to Jacob by subterfuge (Gen 29). This trouble, once begun, continued for many generations, through the sisters’ sons and then the tribes they fathered.
- 4) ‘A maidservant when she displaces her mistress’: Hagar, given by Sarai to Abram her husband because Sarai could not conceive a child (Gen 16). The descendants of Ishmael, the son born of Abram’s union with Hagar, have troubled Israel over the centuries.

The Book of Proverbs contains other unsettling associations besides the four things listed here. They include:

- Proverbs 11:22: “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.”
- Proverbs 22:13; 26:13: The sluggard cannot bear to get out of bed in the morning, and worries that a lion waits just outside his door to kill him.
- Proverbs 26:1: “Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, honor is not fitting for a fool.”
- Proverbs 26:11: “As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.”

Things that seem, at first look, to be out of place are a staple of the Proverbs — but are also found throughout the Bible. “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2Cor 12:10). “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Through these incongruous associations, God arrests us in our tracks, and forces us to contemplate the great chasm between the circumstances of the natural world, in which we must live, and those of the spiritual world, in which we are commanded to live.

Under three things the earth trembles: “Trembles” is the Hebrew “ragaz”: to rage, quake or quiver, or to be in tumult; the KJV has “is disquieted”. It may be reasonable to say the earth (“eret”: land) trembles or quakes when there is a change in dynasty in a country (i.e., a servant becomes king), since often the Bible symbolizes

political revolution as an earthquake. However, to characterize any of the other three upheavals as earthquakes, we must downsize our thinking. Then we realize that a gluttonous fool may make life unbearable for family and servants. For them, at least, it may feel as though their whole world is shaken, even if life for the next-door neighbors seems to go on quietly and placidly. The same holds true for domestic circles when a certain sort of woman becomes mistress of a household, and the disturber of its peace, as in both the third and fourth items of the tetrad.

Under four it cannot bear up: “Nasa” means to lift up; hence: the earth or land “cannot stand”, or “cannot carry on”.

#1. A servant who becomes king: “It is not fitting for a slave to rule over princes” (Prov 19:10). “I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves,” said the Preacher (Eccl 10:7). Later, in the aftermath of Jerusalem’s fall at the hands of the Babylonians, Jeremiah lamented that “slaves rule over us, and there is none to free us from their hands” (Lam 5:8).

When a servant — any lesser minister or official — is elevated to ruling status, then truly the earth (the land or habitable world) may seem upside down; in other words, there will be a social upheaval at the highest level. If this upstart is not accustomed to such power, he might become intoxicated in his new position. He might become a power-hungry dictator who delights in punishing his previous superiors or enemies, and in oppressing everyone else: an Adolph Hitler, a Joseph Stalin, or a Saddam Hussein. Bible examples include Haman (Esth 3:1), Jeroboam son of Nebat (1Kgs 11:26-28; 12:30), Zimri (1Kgs 16:9-20), and Hazael (2Kgs 8:12).

Of course, not every servant becomes intolerable when lifted up in status; some may prove wiser and more capable than those whom they replace. A prime example of this sort was Joseph (Gen 41:41); all his subsequent actions in ruling Egypt demonstrate how suitable he was for his elevated status.

#2. A fool who is full of food: “It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury” (Prov 19:10). A fool who becomes “full of food” describes someone who suddenly becomes rich. Perhaps a parent or some other relative dies, and he inherits a fortune. Perhaps some unexpected windfall confers wealth upon him. In his new situation, he may continue to be coarse and brutish, or profane and abusive, just as he had been before. But now he has more time on his hands, and perhaps more ability to make life miserable for those around him, or near him. This situation may cause a small earthquake, surely, compared to what a Hitler can produce on a national and international scale, but nevertheless intolerable for those close to the fool.

The word for “fool” here is “nabal”, which represents the worst kind of overbearing blasphemer (the same word is used in Psa 14:1; Prov 17:7, 21; 1Sam 25:25). The man Nabal seems to be the one who most exemplifies the qualities of a fool, and we note that it was at the very moment he was holding a feast, celebrating his good fortune, and eating and drinking to excess (1Sam 25:36), that his fate was sealed (vv 37,38). Thus it is easy to see the brutish Nabal as the pattern for Christ’s parable of the rich fool, who exulted in his wealth and laid plans for a long and prosperous future, not realizing that his life was about to be required of him (Luke 12:15-21).

#3. An unloved woman who is married: The Hebrew word “saneḥ” signifies hated (the KJV has “odious”; the JPS has “loathsome”), but may be given a lesser nuance, as in the NIV here. The Hebrew may bear the meanings of reject, disregard, treat with less respect, or simply to love less.

It could be that the husband, for some reason, finds his wife physically unattractive; possibly he is simply incapable of showing love to her. Feeling herself to be unloved, for whatever reason, the wife may imagine herself to be hated, as Leah did (see Gen 29:31, 33, where the same Hebrew word “saneḥ” occurs). This can make life intolerable for the unloved woman, who in turn can make life intolerable for her husband and others in the household. This situation might also describe the household of Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Penninah (1Sam 1).

The Law specifically instructs a man with two wives to treat the unloved (or “hated”: KJV) wife with the same respect as the other (Deut 21:15-17). Such a law, however, could only address the external aspects of the relationship. No law could compel one to feel love in the same way toward both, or to express the same love toward both in all their most personal interactions. No matter what is done, a woman would most likely know the difference between the pretense and the real thing.

#4. A maidservant who displaces her mistress: The fourth unbearable thing is the maid who dispossesses her mistress, or who is elevated above her. “Mistress” here is “gibboreth”, the feminine of “gibbor”, which means mighty one or lord; hence the “gibboreth” is the lady of the house, with authority over the servants.

After Hagar had conceived and knew she was pregnant, “she began to despise her mistress” (Gen 16:4). The resulting tension from the concubine Hagar’s threat to Sarah’s preeminence in the household of Abraham (Gen 16:5; 21:10) suggests how unbearable such a situation might become, for all concerned.

Wisdom for Daily Life

The Book of Proverbs will not allow Christians to linger in the land of the theoretical. We love to keep Christianity on an abstract level, rather than on an applicational one. Our greatest failing as Christians is not that we know too little (while this is often regrettably true), but that we fail to do what we know we should. The emphasis of Proverbs is both on the acquisition of wisdom and the application of it. Seldom do we find ourselves “in church” in this book, but rather in the home, on the job, and dealing with the mundane matters of daily living.

Proverbs forces the reader to translate principles into practice. Often, it was the prophets who proclaimed the principles which Proverbs specifically related to life. For example, Amos wrote: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). Proverbs instructs us in more specific terms: “Diverse weights and diverse measures are both alike abominations to the LORD” (Prov 20:10). The Book of Proverbs commands the butcher to be righteous by taking his thumb off the scales.

Robert Deffinbaugh

(13) Tetrad Five: Four small but wise things (verses 24-28)

“Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise: Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer; coneys are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags; locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks; a lizard can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in kings’ palaces.”

When the earth “trembles” and “cannot bear up” under angry, hurtful and troublesome people (vv 21-23), there are small ones who survive by wisely avoiding the trouble. This tetrad describes four such creatures.

It is plain to see that God is revealed in the “great things”, such as “the earth’s foundations” and the recesses of the seas (Job 38:3-16), the stars of the heavens, and the inscrutable laws by which they follow their courses (Job 38:31-33; cp Psa 19:1-6). But these verses demonstrate the glory of God in the “small things”, which He also created. When we consider God’s hand even in these matters, then, like the poet William Blake, we may marvel in a different way:

*“To see a world in a grain of sand,
And heaven in a flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.”*

We are reminded that God is everywhere, that His power is absolute, and that He instructs us by the majestic but also by the microscopic. We are reminded that He is seen in the heavens (Psa 139:1-10), but also in the tiny fetus developing in its mother’s womb (vv 13-16); that He works with nations and armies, but also in the quiet, humble hearts and lives of unnoticed people.

In these four “little” creatures — in their natures, instincts and habits — we see God’s wisdom, foresight, power and provision. Here are lessons of practical benefit and eternal consequence:

- 1) Ants are tiny, weak creatures, but they plan ahead and provide for themselves and others (v 25).
- 2) Coneys are powerless creatures, yet they know where to find safety and they stick close to the place where it is found (v 26).
- 3) A locust by itself can accomplish practically nothing, but it knows how to work together with others of its kind to do great things (v 27).
- 4) Lizards know how to be unobtrusive and avoid trouble (v 28).

Without much difficulty, we could imagine a whole string of insults directed at men and women, using little creatures like these. ‘He has the brains of an ant.’ ‘She has the strength of a rabbit’, or ‘the sense of a grasshopper’. Or ‘He’s as low as a lizard.’ The irony in these verses is that, in God’s assessment, these little animals show more characteristics of quality than do many people.

In the proverbs of Agur, we have seen already that humans (made in God’s image) are often disrespectful of others (v 11), haughty (v 13), downright mean (v 14),

obsessively greedy (v 15), and grossly immoral (v 20), among others things. By contrast, the wise man Agur points out that some of the smallest of God's "lower" creation do precisely what God designed them for and intended them to do. In this they demonstrate care for one another, a spirit of cooperation, meekness, harmony, and something like humility. "Ask the animals," says Job to his three friends, "and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you" (Job 12:7). What is the LORD trying to tell us? Does it perhaps have to do with our own families and ecclesias, and how we should act with and toward one another?

#1. *Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer:* The example of the small yet mighty ant is remarkable (see Prov 6:6-11). It is proverbial for industriousness. It cares for the young; it works quietly, unceasingly, and without interfering with others. It works for the good of the community with an astonishing sense of organization. The ants are ingenious carpenters, building their own systems of homes and underground tunnels. They keep their homes scrupulously clean. Each has a definite job in life for the good of the community. They will not shrink from heavy burdens, and will cooperate to bear them. Ants are presented as examples of wisdom. We need to ponder their way of life, and emulate their useful traits.

The ants make wise, practical provisions during the summer, which is the time of harvest, as does the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 (see vv 10, 13, 15, 19, 21, and 27 there). "When the ravening lions lack, and suffer hunger, the laborious ants have plenty, and know no want" (Henry). Their actions teach us to do the same, and not just for the material things (cf Prov 10:4; 12:11, 24; 20:13; etc), but also in making wise spiritual "provisions". We may do this by "redeeming the time", that is, making the most of our opportunities while we can (Col 4:5). Thus we may lay up eternal treasures in safe places with our heavenly Father (Matt 6:19-21; cp 1Cor 15:58).

#2. *Coneys are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags:* The "coney" (Hebrew "shaphan"), or "badger" in the RSV, is also known as "the hyrax or rock badger" (NIV mg). "Indigenous to Sub-Saharan and East Africa, the hyrax is found as far north as Syria. Its habitat is rocky terrain, in both desert and forested regions. It varies in size from about 17 to 21 inches and weighs from five to 12 pounds. Hyraxes feed mainly on grass and do not ruminate... Although like desert animals they use water efficiently... they have difficulty regulating body temperature and therefore seek shelter in the rocks. Social organization consists of family groups of about half a dozen related adult females and an adult male. Family units may join to form larger groups of up to about 25... Lifespan is nine to 12 years" (ABD).

Thomson writes of these in *The Land and the Book*. When climbing up to explore an old castle fallen into decay in the Holy Land, he sees them "quietly sitting among the ruins". "I have seen them in the wild cliffs of the Litany, below Blat, and also above the rocky pass of el Bulyad, on the Ladder of Tyre. In shape they resemble the rabbit, but are smaller, and of a dull russet color." They are, he says, "rarely met with except in such rocky regions as this".

As the KJV quaintly puts it, the coney is a “feeble folk”. They are no match for lions, wolves and other predators. They are not fast, not strong, and not even especially prolific. Therefore, they must be sure of their refuge: “The crags are a refuge for the coney” (Psa 104:18).

Conscious of their own natural defenselessness, the coney resorts to burrows in the rocks, and is secure from their enemies. In spiritual matters, we may be as weak and as exposed to peril as the timid coney, and we should be as wise to seek a shelter. Our best security is within the fortress of an unchangeable Yahweh, whose Name is a strong tower (Prov 18:10) where His unalterable promises stand like giant walls of rock, and to which the righteous seek for safety. All His glorious attributes are guarantees of safety for those who put their trust in Him.

Especially is this true of His Son, in whom His Name dwells. The sinner may flee to the cleft of the rock (Isa 33:16), that is, to Christ Jesus, and in his wounded side find a safe resting-place. No king in his Masada, no person protected by a modern security system, is more secure than the coney in his rocky burrow. The master of ten thousand chariots, or a nuclear arsenal, is not as well protected as the little dweller in the mountain’s cleft. When they remain in Jesus, the weak are strong, and the defenseless safe; they could not be stronger if they were giants, or safer if they were in a great fortress. Faith gives to men on earth the protection of the God of heaven. The coney cannot build a castle, but they avail themselves of what is there already.

We Christadelphians may be a “feeble folk”, or a “little flock” (Luke 12:32). Jesus said, “Do not be afraid, little flock.” As a feeble folk, we may be afraid of many things, not least of which is that we *are* a feeble folk. Our Lord tells us not to fear. Like the coney, we must learn to make our homes near the rock; then we will be unafraid. (One of the titles of God is “Tzur”, the Rock: Deut 32:4.)

The Master spoke to Peter, whose name means “Rock”: “On this rock [meaning Peter’s profession of faith in Jesus Christ: v 16] I will build my ecclesia,” he said, “and the gates of Hades [the grave] will not overcome it” (Matt 16:18):

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (Matt 7:24,25).

#3. Locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks: The locusts seem to act with a perfect discipline, marching in orderly divisions and companies (Hebrew “chatzatz”, meaning to cut or divide), as though some unseen Power were their king or commanding general. Their devastating march is described in Joel 2:3-9 and Amos 7:1,2. Like the ants, they work together instinctively, and thus achieve what it would be impossible for any or all of them to do individually.

The wisdom here is not in the character of the work the locust armies do, for to us it seems only destructive. Instead, the wisdom is seen in their cooperative association with one another. As believers, we too have an appointed work to do, and we will be so much more productive if we work together.

We Christadelphians have no (visible) king, but *if* we work together in unity (Eph 4:11-16), and in “one body” (1Cor 12:12-27), then we may achieve great things, by the grace of God.

There are skills that make it much easier to work together in unity. E. W. Clarkson, for example, writes: “It is an essential part of personal equipment that a man be able to cooperate with others. And in the great majority of cases this means readiness to take an inferior place, to obey instructions, to fall in with the suggestions of other people, to forego our own preference and adopt another man’s method. It means listening and learning, conciliation and concession, punctuality and politeness” (*Pulpit Commentary*).

#4. A lizard can be caught with the hand: “Shemamiyth” (translated “lizard” in the NIV) occurs only once in the Old Testament, which as we might expect can make exact identification very difficult. The KJV has “spider”, but it is the only major translation that speaks of the animal itself grasping walls with its own hands. Modern versions like the RSV, JPS, NEB and NIV make this passive instead of active: the animal in question is one that can be grasped by a man’s hand, in other words, one that is small and not at all dangerous. The NIV translation, “can be caught with the hand”, fits the pattern of the other three verses in this tetrad, in that it describes some form of weakness or smallness. If (as seems consistent with the other verses) this translation is more accurate, then the creature described here is probably some form of lizard (RV, RSV, JPS, NEB, NIV), perhaps a gecko — for who would want to pick up a spider with bare hands? The NIDOTTE suggests a chameleon. Whichever creature is actually meant, of course, the spiritual lessons are essentially the same.

“Yet it is found in kings’ palaces”: As another proverb says: “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men” (Prov 22:29). In parable, this teaches ingenuity, patience and persistence. Jesus himself commends those who “persevere”, “stand firm to the end”, “endure”, “persist”, and “do not become weary in doing good” (Matt 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13; Rom 2:7).

As Christadelphians, we may not be very wise or numerous or strong. Yet if we are persistent in faith, then we may one day stand in the palace of *the* King. The word translated “palaces” here is the plural of “heykal”, which often refers to a “temple”; this is understandable when we realize that the temple in Jerusalem was God’s house also:

“One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple [‘heykal’]” (Psa 27:4).

The words of Paul to the Corinthians, who were often too “wise” and too “strong” for their own good, are a useful comment on this verse, and also on the theme of the whole tetrad:

“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of

noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord’ ” (1Cor 1:26-31).

(14) Tetrads Six: Four stately things (verses 29-31)

“There are three things that are stately in their stride, four that move with stately bearing: a lion, mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing; a strutting rooster, a he-goat, and a king with his army around him.”

The form “metibe” (from “yatab”, to be) occurs twice in verse 29, where the NIV translates it as “stately”. It has the idea of “doing good”, of moving well, “magnificently” (NET), or in a “stately” manner (RV, ASV, RSV, NIV) — first in one’s steps (“stride”: NIV; from “tsa’ad”, a pace or regular step), and then in one’s more general movements or actions (“move”: NIV; from “yalak”, to walk).

The four creatures enumerated in verses 29-31 proceed with a grand air, strutting or posing. The idea is that they move in a stately or royal fashion, not so much swiftly as gracefully, and with dignity.

Agur’s irony shows through especially as we reach the last vignette of the series. We may be impressed with, even in awe of, the quiet, sinuous grace of the lion; it is not hard to imagine ourselves standing powerless before such a creature. On the other hand, the strutting rooster and the male goat seem more amusing to us, in the same way a ‘ferocious’ chihuahua facing off against a German shepherd makes us laugh. Then the fact that the king closes the procession of creatures here makes him look somewhat ridiculous also.

Each of the four, but especially the king, may think of himself as being in command, and lord of all he surveys — and so each may be, in his own restricted sphere. But to point out the similarity among such greatly disparate creatures is also to realize that each — even the great king — is consumed by pride, out of all proportion to his importance in the grand scheme of things. Even the great king Nebuchadnezzar, who boasted of his wonderful construction projects, was brought low, to the level of a beast of the field, grazing on grass for seven years (Dan 4:25,32,33).

#1. A lion, mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing: “Lion” here is “layish”, which occurs only here and in Isaiah 30:6 and Job 4:11; the word signifies a strong lion. “Mighty” is “gibbor”, a mighty warrior or hero. (This is the Hebrew root for the name “Gabriel”, the angel who is the mighty one of El). More precisely, the lion is “the mightiest” of beasts; he is also called, reasonably in this context, ‘the king of beasts’, having the regal bearing of a monarch. The lion is proverbial for strength and ferocity (2Sam 1:23; Mic 5:8; Job 37:4; Prov 19:12; 20:2; 28:15).

#2. A strutting rooster: The Hebrew phrase “zarzir mothnayim” means “girt of loins”; it occurs only here in the Bible. According to Kidner, “the modern Hebrew

means the starling, of all unlikely candidates, with its bustling waddle.” The KJV and ASV interpreted this phrase to mean the greyhound because it is narrow in the flanks (but this breed is relatively modern, and so can scarcely fit the bill here). The RSV and NIV choose the cock or rooster, certainly noted for its strutting. The RV margin has “war-horse”, girt for battle, with its stately trappings (cf Job 39:19-25). Others have suggested the zebra (quite likely unknown to Agur, however) and the raven. There seems to be no clear identification that tips the scales decisively in favor of any candidate. Again, it may be said that the precise identity of the intended animal is not nearly as important as the lessons being taught.

#3. A he-goat: There is no question that this refers to the male goat (“tayish”: the same word used of Jacob’s male goats in Gen 30:35; 32:14). Like the rooster and the male lion for that matter, he is in his element — and seemingly proud and jealously protective of his position — when at the head of his flock or harem (Jer 50:8). Interestingly, in a highly figurative prophecy in Isaiah 14:9, the “leaders, or chief ones, of the earth”, dead and buried in Sheol, are referred to as the plural of “attuw’d”, another word for “male goats”. Alexander the Great is also described, prophetically, as a he-goat (Dan 8:5, 8, 21; cf v 23).

#4. A king with his army around him: The NIV translation comes the closest to the Masoretic Text, more so than the KJV which reads “a king, against whom there is no rising up”. The questionable word is the Hebrew “alquwm”, occurring only this once in the Old Testament.

[The Masoretic Text is the predominant Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible (or the Old Testament). Many centuries after it was first received, the Jewish Bible was copied, edited and distributed over several centuries (the 7th through the 10th centuries AD) by a group of Jews known as the Masoretes. These scribes made very valuable additions to the text, showing vowel points and variant readings which for the most part have been of great value to all subsequent students.]

It is this word “alquwm” which the NIV renders “his army” (from a similar Arabic word, meaning “band of soldiers”), but which the KJV renders “rising up” by an emendation. Following the same emendation, the NIV margin reads: “a king secure against revolt”. The LXX, different yet again, renders this: “a king haranguing his people”.

[An emendation is a correction or alteration made to the text by scholars. Regarding the Old Testament, emendations are usually suggested when there is some question about a particular word, and a different vowel marking seems to yield a more satisfactory meaning. In the Old Testament, the vowel markings are not nearly as ancient as the rest of the text, but were added more than a thousand years after the originals were written. Less often, emendations may be suggested when, in some scholar’s opinion, a different consonant yields a more helpful meaning.]

No matter which of these alternatives is chosen, the focus of the text is on the stately appearance and conduct of the king on some auspicious occasion, such as a court ceremony or a military review.

Some commentators see the irony in the comparisons of this tetrad, while others

don't at all. To each his own. But a slightly bemused tone in verses 29-31 would form a logical bridge to the last two verses of Agur's wisdom (vv 32,33), which warn against "playing the fool" and "exalting" oneself. There is, after all, only one king who can march in a truly stately manner, in the midst of his armies, and against whom there is truly no rising up.

(15) The causes of strife (verses 32,33)

"If you have played the fool and exalted yourself, or if you have planned evil, clap your hand over your mouth! For as churning the milk produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife."

These last verses of Proverbs 30 call for some self-criticism by pointing out that the outcome of foolishness is strife. Kidner entitles these verses "A concluding call to humility", explaining: "Humility, the undercurrent of this chapter, which has already commended itself (directly or by contrast) as reverence (vv 1-9), restraint (vv 10-17), and wonder (vv 18-31), is finally manifested as peaceable behavior (vv 32,33)." Christ-like behavior involves avoiding strife whenever possible.

The three activities listed in verse 32 should be guarded against:

- 1) "Played the fool" is a verb derived from the noun "nabal", describing a hardened, hateful, and deliberately hurtful "fool", not just a simpleton.
- 2) "Exalted yourself" is "nasa", to lift up oneself, proudly and arrogantly. The same word is translated "disdainful" in verse 13. Exalting oneself is generally condemned (Prov 8:13; 11:2; 16:18), and especially if it includes put-downs of others, which is the point of the following verse 33.
- 3) "Planned evil" is "zammoth", meaning "to plan, usually in an evil sense" (Strong's). Compare similar thoughts (though with other Hebrew words) in Proverbs 6:14 (the scoundrel... "who plots evil with deceit in his heart"... will be destroyed without remedy) and Proverbs 16:27 ("a scoundrel plots evil").

"Clap your hand over your mouth!" is "yad lepeh" — literally and abruptly, "Hand to mouth!" No verb is used. (The phrase is sharp and strident, like a crisp military command; compare Proverbs 23:2: "Put a knife to your throat!") Generally, this phrase may be compared to Job 40:4,5 ("I put my hand over my mouth"), as well as Job 21:5; 29:9; Jdgs 18:19 (where the NIV's "don't say a word" is literally "lay your hand upon your mouth"); and Micah 7:16. This is a gesture of unworthiness and repentance, as well as a resolution to speak no more, either in defense of oneself, or in continuance of evil words.

Verse 33 gives the reason for the admonitions of verse 32. These three behaviors, if not stopped, will surely lead to and cause the "strife" in verse 33.

On the stirring up or producing of strife, generally, we might consider Proverbs 6:14: "[He] who plots evil with deceit in his heart — he always stirs up dissension." Proverbs 15:1: "A harsh word stirs up anger." And also Proverbs 29:22: "An angry man stirs up dissension." Repeatedly, the admonition of the Proverbs is to avoid causing "strife" (e.g., Prov 17:1, 14; 18:6; 26:17, 21).

The same Hebrew word is used three times here, being translated “churning”, “twisting” and “stirring up” (“miytz”, to press or squeeze). This is the only verse where this word occurs in all the Old Testament.

A related word, “matzah”, describes flat, unleavened bread, perhaps because of its pressed-out form unaltered by any yeast.

A form of butter is produced by squeezing and pummeling animal skins filled with milk. Thomson, who toured Palestine and studied its Bedouin peoples in the mid-19th century, comments on this practice: “What are these women kneading and shaking so zealously in that large black bag, suspended from this three-legged [tripod]? That is a ‘bottle’... not a bag, made by stripping off [in one piece] the skin of a young buffalo. It is full of milk, and that is their way of churning. When the butter ‘has come’, they take it out, boil or melt it, and then put it in ‘bottles’ made of goats’ skins. In winter it resembles candied honey, in summer it is mere oil... There is no analogy between our mode of churning, and pulling a man’s nose until the blood comes, but in this Arab operation the comparison is quite natural and emphatic.”

In place of this rather picturesque “churning” of butter, the Pulpit Commentary offers an alternative one that emphasizes the aspect of “pressing”: “Most probably the reference is to cheese, the term used, ‘chemah’, being applied indifferently to curdled milk and cheese. To produce this substance, the curdled milk is put into little baskets of rush or palm leaves, tied closely, and then pressed under heavy stones... The pressure applied to milk produces cheese, and as pressure applied to the nose brings blood, so the pressure of wrath brings forth strife.”

The word for “produces” is repeated three times. Again, the same Hebrew word is used in all three cases: “yotsir”, meaning to go out, to result in, to produce.

“Butter” is the Hebrew “chemah”. Some say this same word applies to curdled milk, butter, sour milk, cottage cheese, yogurt, and cream; that is, all milk byproducts. Others argue that “chemah” refers to only “butter”, since the Hebrew word is always so translated by the LXX, and several other words are also used for other milk products (NIDOTTE). Together with honey, butter constitutes paradise-like food worthy of Immanuel, or the Messiah (Isa 7:15).

Ross points out a subtle wordplay on the word “nose” (“ap”), which is related to the common word for “anger” (“appayim”), probably connected with the flaring of the nostrils.

The Hebrew “riyb” (“strife”) occurs at least 12 times in the Book of Proverbs alone. The use of this Hebrew word elsewhere strongly implies that the setting is the courtroom or some other formal occasion. McKane says this describes “the kind of person who thrives on acrimony and who seeks a pretext to transform every difference or disagreement into a bitter legal contest”.

In the New Testament, “strife” (Greek “eris”: strife, quarreling, contentiousness) is one of the kinds of “wickedness” and “depravity” listed in Romans 1:29-31. Paul warns, “Although [men] know God’s righteous decree that those who do

such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them” (v 32). Paul has a similar list in Galatians 5:19-21, where among the “works of the flesh” he groups discords, jealousy, selfish ambition, and dissensions and factions.

Are we surprised to see that these works are listed right alongside “sexual immorality, debauchery... idolatry... and drunken orgies”? Paul concludes with these words: “I warn you... that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (v 21).

Do we ever stop to think that “strife” keeps such deadly company? How easy it is for us sometimes to justify strife in matters of the Truth. What is hurtful strife for the other fellow is, for me, “earnestly contending for the faith” (Jude 1:3), wielding “the sword of the Spirit” (Eph 6:17), and “fighting the good fight” (1Tim 1:18). Of course it is!

Even *if* it is justifiable, *sometimes*, is it so *always*? That’s not for me to ask you, or you to ask me — at least not nearly so much as it is for each of us to ask, and answer, about ourselves as individuals: ‘Is what I’m doing, or saying, or writing — right now, at this moment — a righteous, disinterested, kind, loving labor for God’s Truth, absolutely and only? Or does it include some measure — maybe the least little bit — of anger, hurt feelings, natural combativeness, jealousy, or ambition?’ The answer ought to be: “Let a man examine... himself” (1Cor 11:28).

The following verses are from the NIV, with key KJV words in brackets:

“The Lord’s servant must not quarrel (strive); instead, he must be kind (gentle) to everyone... Those who oppose him he must gently (meekly) instruct” (2Tim 2:24,25).

“Slander (speak evil of) no one... be peaceable (no brawlers) and considerate (gentle)... show true humility (meekness) toward all men” (Tit 3:2).

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness (meekness) and respect (fear)” (1Pet 3:15).

In 1 Timothy 6:4-6, the apostle Paul once again puts “strife” (“eris”) alongside some terrible companions: in this case, conceit, controversies, quarrels about words, envy, malicious talk, evil suspicion, and constant frictions, in contrast to godliness with contentment (1Tim 6:4-6).

In verse 4, “quarrels about words” (NIV), “disputes about words” (RSV), and “strifes of words” (KJV) are all translations of the powerful Greek word “logomachia” — literally “word-wars”. A variant of this same word, “logomacheo”, is found in 2 Timothy 2:14, where it may be translated “to war with words” (“quarreling about words” in the KJV). These are the only two places the word is found.

It has been said that words are merely the counters of wise men, but they are the money of fools. To the wise man, words are no more than tools to convey his thoughts. He conscientiously defines and uses his words so that they may mean but one thing, seeking to lower the risk of being misunderstood. He is pleased

to explain his words further, or restate his point differently, when necessary, if it will help the other party.

On the other hand, to some men, words may be an end in themselves. Those whom Paul warns against “logomachia” are those who spend time in useless debate, trying to win points — so much time, in fact, that they never have time for true reflective thinking, much less self-examination. By “word-wars” they strive with their opponents, and encourage strife in return. These word-wars create an atmosphere of mistrust, envy, doubt and anger, not only in oneself but also in others.

Such activity leads to judging others unnecessarily for their exact words. “Watching for iniquity”, or “making a man an offender for [one] word”, or “laying a word-snare” for a man are all strongly disapproved of by the LORD (Isa 29:20,21). Word-wars have caused some to be driven away by the intolerance of others, who contrive a “case” against them, spread it abroad, and then will not listen to reasonable explanation.

Word-wars have led brethren to lie, deceive and misrepresent matters concerning their own brothers, for whom Christ died (Rom 14:15). Word-wars set battle lines; sides are chosen, and cliques formed. There are accusations and then too often counter-accusations, leading to grudges and reprisals. All in the name of “earnestly contending for the Truth”.

“A quarrel is like buttermilk: once it’s out of the churn, the more you shake it, the more sour it grows” (Irish proverb).

When the cream from milk is agitated in a churn, it will separate into butter and buttermilk. The process has been known from the beginning of the world, and it is sure and certain in its results. Likewise, blood vessels in the nose are weak and near the surface. If the nose is hit, twisted, or squeezed hard, these vessels will break and blood will flow from the nose. Nosebleeds are very common, and a simple wringing of the nose is enough to cause this bleeding.

With the same certainty, acting in wrath to promote or defend your cause will create strife. Wrath is anger, and strife is fighting and division. How one deals with anger is a key factor in avoiding conflict and trouble. Angry strife leads to confusion and every evil work; wise men ought to be peacemakers instead (James 3:13-18).

Everyone can become angry (Mark 3:5), but wise men defer anger and pass over the offences of others (Prov 19:11). Wise men do not let anger cause them to sin, and they get rid of it as soon as possible (Eph 4:26). Wise men are slow to wrath (Prov 14:17, 29; James 1:19). They rule their spirits and do not allow the passion of anger to control them (Prov 16:32).

This verse advises us “to avoid continually harping on about an issue. Just as repeated churning of milk makes butter, so the way we keep returning to a grief from the past will eventually cause an argument. Wise is the brother or sister who forgets earlier contentions. Just as the Father remembers our sins no more (Heb 8:12), we should move on in our relationships and not keep bringing up former strifes if we want the relationship to grow” (Peter Forbes).

When I grew up, it was called “picking on” someone. Small children knew exactly what this meant: poking and prodding, whispering of names, funny looks, little punches. These were all designed to provoke an angry response from the other child, and if possible to bring parental rebuke or punishment down upon him or her. Today we sit in our backyard and watch the young dog dancing around the older dog, sometimes pawing, sometimes sniffing, sometimes nipping the tail, sometimes grabbing an ear, until finally the older one whines or growls or fights back. Then the younger one dances away, waits a few moments, and renews his meddling.

Those who watch sporting events on television, especially now that instant replay is available, will notice how many penalties are called on the *second* person to do wrong, while the first party in the altercation gets off free. A little punch, push, or ugly whisper may provoke retaliation — and the second party in the squabble is whistled for the foul, or removed from the game. The instigator smiles to himself and saunters away.

Adults can do this too, not quite in the same way, but perhaps subconsciously, or as a matter of habit, or simply for lack of something better to do. A man may do some small thing that he knows will irritate a co-worker, just because he can. A woman may retell someone else’s unkind comment, knowing this will cause anger in her friend, just for the ‘pleasure’ of seeing her reaction.

The Book of Proverbs has it right. It speaks of:

- a) “playing the fool”: joking or jesting, with the intent of hurting someone else;
- b) “exalting oneself”: deliberately but subtly pointing out one’s own ‘good points’ or ‘good fortune’, and agitating a listener who is made to feel inferior by the comparison; and worst perhaps,
- c) “planning evil”: planting lies, innuendos or exaggerations that harm another’s reputation.

All such actions — just like those of the children or the athletes — are examples of “picking on” someone else, and possibly provoking that other person into the sin of anger. As if there should be satisfaction in seeing the shortcomings of others! Afterward, the provocateur may, with the sincerest protest of innocence, deny any responsibility for the final outcome.

In ecclesias there may be some brothers and sisters who do the very same things:

- they deliberately speak, or dress or act in a way which they know will offend others;
- they deliberately bring up points in Bible class which they know will cause arguments (and perhaps even anger and bitter words); or
- they deliberately recall something best forgotten, and then feign surprise when someone else is hurt by the revelation.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says love “is not easily provoked”. That is no excuse, however, for being an active *provoker*. Paul does not say that love “does not easily provoke *others*”, but he does say that “love is kind, is not rude, keeps no record of wrongs, does not delight in evil, and always protects”. All these characteristics

are diametrically opposed to the subtle stirring up of anger that produces strife.

Paul also says, quite to the point, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me” (v 11).

Children, and childish adults, engage in childish behavior. Those who are mature in Christ put away such tactics. The truth of the gospel can be upheld without bitterness, recriminations, character assassinations, vendettas, or political campaigns. The truth can be upheld in love, gentleness, patience and mercy.

If a man cannot uphold Truth in the right way, with the right motives and attitudes, then it is better for him to do nothing at all. If he tries to uphold Truth in the wrong ways, then surely the ‘medicine’ he offers to the ‘patient’ is more dangerous than the ‘disease’ it is intended to cure.

(16) A final thought

The words of “Agur” are perhaps 3,000 years old, but they are by no means out-of-date. His keen observations about the world and the creatures in it are powerful and sometimes so pointed that, like the “goads” and “nails” of the wise (Eccl 12:11), they hurt even as they instruct. Painful as it might be to hold up Agur’s mirror to our souls, we ought to do it, because another inspired wise man has written: “A man ought to examine himself” (1Cor 11:28). This otherwise unknown poet, philosopher and prophet can provide even modern Bible students with insights into their lives, and exhortations to strengthen and improve their walk in Christ.

George Booker (Austin Leander, TX)

A Guide for Life

Many years ago, an elder brother... wrote to a young relative about to be baptized and urged him to “make the book of Proverbs his guide for life”... I thought this piece of advice rather poor, and felt sure that there were many other books of the Bible which could have been recommended before Proverbs. At the time I found this particular part of Scripture rather dry and unrewarding. It seemed like a mere collection of truisms without any great spiritual worth. But the years between have mellowed this view, and led to a much deeper appreciation, approximating much more nearly to the view of the brother referred to, who has long since fallen asleep...

For this is not just a jumbled assortment of smart sayings about this and that. It is a book of principles. Almost any verse is calculated to stop a man in his tracks once its meaning is grasped, though this may not always lie on the surface. Like wisdom itself, the meaning has to be sought for “as for hid treasure”. Some of these apparently obvious statements are found to be loaded with deep spiritual significance when examined more closely.

Len Richardson

A Unifying Approach to Life

There are details of character small enough to escape the mesh of the law and the broadsides of the prophets, and yet decisive in personal dealings. Proverbs moves in this realm, asking what a person is like to live with, or to employ; how he manages his affairs, his time and himself. This good lady, for instance — does she talk too much? That cheerful soul — is he bearable in the early morning? And this friend who is always dropping in — here is some advice for him... and for that rather aimless lad...

But Proverbs is not a portrait-album or a book of manners: it offers a key to life. The samples of behavior which it holds up to view are all assessed by one criterion, which could be summed up in the question, "Is this wisdom or folly?" This is a unifying approach to life, because it suits the most commonplace realms as fully as the most exalted.

Derek Kidner

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