

Triennial Torah Study – 2nd Year 25/02/2012

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Lev 17	Ezek 4-6	Prov 30	Acts 26
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Leviticus 17

Holiness, the Centralization of Sacrifice and the Sanctity of Blood (Leviticus 17)

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He constituted them as a nation and as His special people. From the beginning of His dealing with the people of Israel, God made it very clear that He was not like the gods of the nations. His terrifying judgments on Egypt showed His indisputable reality and supreme sovereignty over the natural world, the animal creation, men, nations, kings and the so-called gods feared and worshipped by the gentiles. Indeed, the very first lesson He impressed upon Moses when He called to him from the burning bush was that God was holy (Exodus 3:5).

The fundamental idea behind holiness is separation or setting apart. Throughout the Pentateuch, holiness is usually seen when God declares certain things holy—that is, to be separated from other things by special means for special purposes. The Holy Days, for example (see Leviticus 23), are declared to be holy because they are days separated from other days, imbued with special meaning and reserved for special activity defined by God. Similarly, the furnishings of the tabernacle were holy because they were set apart for special God-ordained uses and treatment. The high priest's garments were holy garments (Exodus 28:2) because they were designed especially for him and reserved only for his use during the performance of the duties of his office. The anointing oil was also holy (Exodus 30:22ff) because it was set apart for special purposes and no other oil could be made like it (verses 31-33). Likewise the incense made to burn on the altar of incense was holy and the mixture was not to be duplicated for common use. "Whoever makes any like it, to smell it, he shall be cut off from his people" (verses 37-38).

Because God is holy—utterly unique, separate from all else—His people must be holy and He must be approached in a holy way. Moreover, because He was in the midst of the camp of Israel (Numbers 5:3), the camp must also be holy. God gives special instructions here concerning sacrifice to ensure that the sacrificing is done in a certain place; Israel is not to sacrifice throughout the camp, but only at the tabernacle. Any man who makes a sacrifice must do so at the door of the tabernacle; anyone who does otherwise will be executed. Why so strict? Why so severe a penalty? God gives one reason in verse 7—namely, to prevent Israel from ignorantly falling into idolatry. Carnal man's natural inclination is to

syncretize—to innovate in religion, combining pagan elements with true religion—and to fall headlong into perverse, unholy idolatry. Israel, following bondage in pagan Egypt for more than 200 years, was prone to idolatry. Remember the golden calf? To deter idolatry, a sufficiently severe penalty was required. And, to greatly reduce the natural tendency to syncretism, God enacted a centralization of sacrifice. Here, too, is seen a principle that runs through much of Scripture: There is safety, security, stability and unity in having a degree of centralization. In the Church of God today, the lesson does not imply rigid control of outlying areas—nor that all aspects of God’s work must be carried out from a single location. That is neither required nor practical. Rather, we should understand the need to be one of general administration, guidance and direction from a centralized authority, such as a governing ministerial council.

Furthermore, this chapter clearly continues the developing theme of holiness. That ritual holiness is in view is seen by the fact that 1) the instructions in this chapter are specifically directed to Aaron and his sons as priests, and then to all Israel; 2) that the instructions are given with regard to sacrifice; and 3) that the last two verses of the chapter are clearly regulations for ritual purity.

God gave Israel strict instruction regarding blood—He categorically forbids its consumption. Today, some try to justify the prohibition against consumption of blood by referring to the many health dangers involved in eating blood. For example, blood corrupts very quickly, and thus disease can be avoided by not ingesting it. Similarly, modern science has proven conclusively that many viral diseases are carried in the blood and consumption of blood can transfer those diseases to the one who eats. But this is not the reason God gives for the prohibition. God declares that the life of an animal is in its blood (verses 11, 14). And this is scientifically accurate since oxygen in the inhaled “breath of life” is carried to each cell of the body by the bloodstream. When blood is shed, life is “poured out,” so to speak. This being the case, God reserves blood for a special purpose—namely, making atonement for sin upon the altar, the giving of life for another. These, then, are the specific reasons God mentions for prohibiting the consumption of blood.

This is not to say there are no health benefits from avoiding the ingestion of blood—there are. And God may have had this in mind as well. (Although it is also possible that eating blood is harmful because God has made it so as a penalty for those who would disobey Him in this way.) From this we may learn an important lesson: God’s laws often have multiple effects, even beyond what is stated in the giving of the law. As mentioned in the highlights on leprosy, the ancient Israelites were in no position to scientifically determine that blood carries bacterial and viral diseases—the technology necessary to do that was thousands of years away. Nevertheless, those who respected God and His commands unknowingly accrued the blessing of good health by avoiding blood consumption, while also learning the spiritual lessons of the use of blood in sacrifice. Truly, God is a most marvelous and merciful lawgiver.

Ezekiel 4-6

The Siege of Jerusalem—A Sign to Both Israel and Judah (Ezekiel 4)

In this second pantomime instructed by God, Ezekiel is directed to act out a mock siege against Jerusalem. Recall that he was to effectively be mute, so the prophet’s strange actions

would communicate God's message. This was to be a sign to the people of Judah living in captivity. No doubt word of what Ezekiel was doing spread throughout the colony and perhaps even to those in faraway Jerusalem.

The prophet is instructed to draw a diagram of the city on a clay tablet and then represent its siege by an attacking army through building miniature earthen siege works around it (Ezekiel 4:1-2). He is also to set up an iron pan between himself and the city as a wall (verse 3). Some commentators have viewed this as depicting a siege wall, but it is in addition to the miniature siege wall of verse 2. Other commentators understand it as a barrier signifying God separating Himself from Jerusalem and no longer protecting it—or even as His “iron-willed” determination to destroy the city. Indeed, Ezekiel is to have his arms uncovered—the image of a man with rolled up sleeves, ready to fight—as God is described in Isaiah 52:10.

The mock siege is given as a “sign to the house of Israel” (verse 3), which is rather interesting. The next verses clearly delineate between the house of Israel (the people of the northern kingdom) and the house of Judah (those of the southern kingdom). Jerusalem, as the ancient capital of all 12 tribes, is used here to represent the nations of both Israel and Judah. The sins of both are what bring about this siege.

As part of the symbolism, Ezekiel is told to lie on one side for 390 days, figuratively bearing the iniquity of the house of Israel, and then for 40 days on the other side, bearing Judah's iniquity (verses 4-6). Based on verse 9, which says that Ezekiel's time of lying on his side was 390 days, some construe the 40 days as being part of the 390. But this goes against the clear sense of verse 6. Verse 9 simply concerns the number of days of the mock siege in which he is required to eat certain food—the 390 and not the 40.

Each day of lying down is said to represent a year (verse 6). This brings to mind Numbers 14:34, where God imposed on Israel the punishment of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness for the 40 days of the mission of those who spied out the Promised Land and returned with an evil report. Interestingly, too, the figures of 390 and 40 add up to 430 years, a significant time span in Israel's history—this being the length of time from God's covenant with Abraham to the Exodus (see Exodus 12:41; Galatians 3:17).

The meaning of the 390 and 40 years is not entirely clear. There are numerous difficulties here. For instance, we aren't told when the count of years begins or ends in either case. And it is not clear whether we should count backwards or forwards. Notice verse 5 in the New King James Version: “For I have laid on you the years of their iniquity.” This seems to imply a count backwards of 390 years of past sin, which strangely—if we started with the time this prophecy was given in 593 B.C.—would land us late in the reign of King David. Or, if we counted back from the northern kingdom's fall at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 B.C., this would place the start of the 390 years in the period of the judges.

But perhaps “years of their iniquity” is meant to imply years due to their iniquity—that is, years of consequences their iniquity has brought about. The Expositor's Bible Commentary states in a footnote on verse 4, “The term ‘aon (awon, ‘sin’) has three basic meanings (1) ‘iniquity,’ (2) ‘guilt of iniquity,’ (3) ‘the punishment for iniquity.’ Here the context reflects the second meaning...though the third meaning can be equally argued.” Indeed, in place of the word iniquity, the Tanakh and NRSV have “punishment.” This changes the meaning entirely, as it

would indicate that the 390 years are a period not of past sin but of coming judgment; the count would be forward and not backward.

Counting 390 years forward from the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. interestingly brings us to 332 B.C., the year that Alexander the Great defeated the Persian forces of Darius III at the Battle of Issus. It has been suggested the northern tribes were basically confined through the remainder of the Assyrian Empire, the entire Babylonian Empire and the duration of the Medo-Persian Empire, finally gaining their freedom with the overthrow of the Persians by Alexander. Perhaps that is so for any Israelites who had remained in the vicinity of northern Assyria. However, it should be mentioned that the Israelite Scythians helped to defeat Assyria and that many of them had migrated away to freedom even before. Certainly a great multitude became free with the onset of the Babylonian period, though a significant number of them were later made to submit to Persian rule. Still, it was the Scythian Massagetae (most likely Israelites), ranging free on the Asian steppes west of the Caspian Sea, who killed the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great when he tried to conquer them. It should also be mentioned that there were still Israelites dwelling under the dominion of Alexander and then of his successors, the Seleucids. These would gain their independence the next century as the Parthians.

As for the 40 years for Judah, this too is uncertain. Some scholars contend that it should be counted backwards, understanding the period to extend from the time of the renewal of the covenant by Josiah in 622 B.C. until the year 582 B.C., which was the time that the remainder of the Jews were transported to Babylon (see Jeremiah 52:30). But why would a period of sin be counted from the renewal of the covenant? Some view the 40 years as the period of terrible sin during the Jewish king Manasseh's reign prior to his repentance—the time of Judah's greatest evil, for which God proclaimed destruction on the nation and its capital (2 Kings 21:10-15; 23:26-27). On the other hand, counting forward—viewing the 40 years as a period of coming judgment—it is conceivable that the time intended is that from the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. to 546 B.C., the year Cyrus the Great secured the western Persian Empire through the conquest of Lydia, effectively making him more powerful than the Babylonians. He returned east the same year. Over the next seven years, he would encroach on Babylonian territory, finally invading Babylon in 539 B.C.

And there are yet other possibilities. A number of scholars point out that Ezekiel's prophecy is dated from the captivity of Jeconiah in 597 B.C. and argue that this should be the starting point for counting forward—noting also that the full 430 years should be counted, thus ending with 167 B.C., the time of the Jewish Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Greeks. Counting from the time the prophetic message was portrayed, 593 B.C., would bring us to 164-163 B.C., when the Maccabean revolt had proven successful. Counting 390 years forward from 593 would bring us to 203-202, the time the Parthians were gaining independence from the Seleucids (and then it is 40 years beyond that that brings us to Judah's push for independence from the Seleucids). Consider, in this light, that the Seleucids were essentially the successors of Assyria and Babylon—and that the years would, in this case, signify the times of emergence from their oppression (as the 430 years in Exodus marked the end of oppression and slavery).

Of course, this is all assuming that the years in question refer to ancient history. Perhaps they have some end-time application. Consider the siege Ezekiel portrays. It is against Jerusalem, and yet it is a sign to both Israel and Judah. Surely this was not meant to be understood in Ezekiel's day, as the northern tribes did not then get the message. Moreover, the siege Ezekiel conducts lasts 430 days, about a year and two months. But the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in ancient times lasted for around two and a half years.

In Ezekiel 4:8, God says he would restrain (literally, "place ropes on") the prophet to make him unable to turn and switch sides during the acting out of the siege. How, then, was Ezekiel able to cook his food—as we next see him instructed—while lying down? The situation was the same as that with Ezekiel's muteness. He wasn't required to be on his side 24 hours a day. He prepared meals and, as we see in chapter 8, he was sitting in his house less than a year and two months later—apparently while the mock siege was still going on (compare 1:1-2; 3:15-16; 8:1). The wording in Ezekiel 4:8 simply means that whenever he lay down, God made sure he was only on the correct side for the specified group of days.

God then tells Ezekiel what he is to eat for the next 390 days—a mixed-grain bread (verse 9). God first told him to bake it in a defiled way, cooking it over dried human waste, in order to symbolize the defiled state of Israel and Judah (verses 12-14). But after Ezekiel expressed his revulsion at this, God allowed him to instead cook the food over cow manure, "a common fuel then as now" (Nelson Study Bible, note on verses 12-15). The issue of defilement, it should be noted, was strictly over the matter of using human waste (see Deuteronomy 23:12-14), not from mixing grains as some have supposed (as the proscription against mixing grains forbade the crossbreeding of plants, not the cooking of them together). Centuries later the apostle Peter felt the same revulsion toward eating unclean animals, refusing when he was told to kill and eat them in a vision (Acts 10:14).

Some have argued that Ezekiel 4:9 provides the recipe for bread that is ideal for sustaining us—as it sustained Ezekiel for more than a year. (You can even buy "Ezekiel 4:9 bread" in some health food stores.) But that is not the point of the verse in its context at all. What we see is that Ezekiel's food was to be "by weight" (verse 10), to symbolize rationing during the time of siege, as the explanation in verses 16-17 makes clear (compare 5:16-17; Leviticus 26:26). "The recipe of six mixed grains for the bread indicates the limited and unusual food supply while in bondage in a foreign land. The small amounts of these grains [evidenced by the fact that they had to be thrown together in a mixture to produce a sufficient quantity of meal] vividly picture the short supply of food in a city under siege. Because a city under siege was cut off from outside supplies, the people had to ration their food and water. If it ran out, they would be forced to surrender. In Jerusalem, the people would be allowed daily only a half pound of bread (twenty shekels) and less than a quart of water (one-sixth of a hin)" (Nelson Study Bible, note on Ezekiel 4:4-11).

Certainly the mixed-grain bread had some sustaining value, but this was far from a balanced diet. If one is going to claim that this is meant to portray ideal food, the same would have to be said for cooking over dung—and that just does not follow. In fact, notice verses 16-17 in the NIV: "Son of man, I will cut off the supply of food in Jerusalem. The people will eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair, for food and water will be scarce. They will be appalled at the sight of each other and will waste away because of their sin." They would

be aghast at the gaunt, emaciated appearance of one another. It is likely that Ezekiel's diet produced the same effect in him: "The people watched and got the message. They watched with growing horror as Ezekiel weighed out his meagre measure of mixed grain and eked out his water ration. They saw the prophet wasting away, as the population of Jerusalem would do under siege" (Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible, note on chapters 4-5).

Again, however, it should be pointed out that this was a prophecy that concerned the future of both Judah and Israel. As such, it was evidently meant in a dual sense—applying in part to Jerusalem's fall to ancient Babylon but also the fall of Judah and Israel to end-time Babylon, as the next chapters make even clearer.

One Third by Pestilence and Famine, One Third by Sword and One Third Into Captivity (Ezekiel 5)

Chapter 5 continues with instructions about the mock siege. God tells Ezekiel to shave his head and beard. Shaving the head and beard was a sign of humiliation and disgrace (compare 7:18; 2 Samuel 10:4). For priests it was a mark of defilement, rendering them unfit for temple duties (Leviticus 21:5). Israel, God's priestly nation, was going to be humiliated and defiled.

The cut hair was to be divided into three equal piles (Ezekiel 5:1-2). At the end of the mock siege, which would not come until more than a year later, the piles of hair were to be dispensed with in different ways. Ezekiel was to place one pile in the middle of the clay diagram and burn them (verse 2), symbolizing the third of the people who would die in the siege by pestilence and famine (verse 12). The next pile of hair—another third—was to be placed outside the perimeter wall and struck with a sword (verse 2), symbolizing those who would suffer violent death at the hands of enemy military forces (verse 12). And the last third was to be tossed into the air for the wind to carry away (verse 2), signifying that one third of the people would be taken captive by military forces and scattered (verse 12).

When and to whom would all of this happen? The destruction is commonly assumed to apply to ancient Jerusalem's fall to the Babylonians in 586 B.C., and that is likely on one level. But, as stated in the comments on chapter 4, Ezekiel is portraying punishment to befall not just Jerusalem but all of Israel—that is, all 12 tribes (symbolized by Jerusalem, it being the ancient capital of all Israel). Notice the end of Ezekiel 5:4: "From there a fire will go out into all the house of Israel." Indeed, this exactly parallels the next chapter, which is directed to "the mountains of Israel" (verse 3). Ezekiel is to proclaim: "Alas, for all the evil abominations of the house of Israel! For they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence" (verse 11). Yet the northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen—to the Assyrians 130 years earlier. So for this prophecy to make sense, it must refer to the future destruction of Israel—which, as other prophecies make clear, is to take place alongside Judah's destruction at the end of the age. For another parallel passage, notice Zechariah 13:8-9: "And it shall come to pass in all the land...that two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, but one-third shall be left in it: I will bring the one-third through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested." Two thirds die, just as in Ezekiel's prophecy. And the last third, though initially brought through the fire, escaping death at first, is then sent through a great period of trial, which fits with the experience of national captivity and scattering. This prophecy of Zechariah was given long after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Indeed, it was given at the time of Judah's

restoration after the Babylonian captivity. So it could not refer to that destruction. In fact, we know the time frame of the foretold destruction since, in the very next verse, the prophecy continues right into Zechariah 14, a message clearly concerning Christ's return at the end of the age. This destruction, then, happens just prior to that.

So again, this is something all Israel—Judah and Israel—will experience at the end of the age. The people of Judah today are the Jewish people. The descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel, on the other hand, primarily make up the nations of Northwest Europe and other nations of Northwest European heritage, including the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (request or download our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* to learn more). Imagine, then, the overwhelming magnitude of destruction that awaits these nations for their sins. If the Israelites today throughout these nations were estimated at around 300 million people, then 100 million would die through pestilence and famine—involving ghastly, desperate instances of cannibalism as the famine raged (Ezekiel 5:10; compare Leviticus 26:29; Deuteronomy 28:52-57). Another 100 million would die at the hands of enemy military forces, and the remaining 100 million would go into captivity.

These tolls are staggering. To make matters worse, recall the prophetic indications that only a tenth of the Israelites who go into captivity in the end time will survive (see Amos 5:3; Isaiah 6:11-13, Living Bible). Using the above numbers, this would mean that only 10 million would remain at Christ's return. These figures should serve as a frightful and dire warning to the people of modern Israel. The horrible terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were as nothing when measured against to what is yet to come (compare Deuteronomy 28:58-68).

While these warnings are graphic and threatening, there is still hope for repentance. Indeed, God always gives a warning with the hope that the disaster He is about to bring may be averted (see Jeremiah 18:5-8; Jonah 4:2, Joel 2:12-14). God does not rejoice in the punishment of the wicked—no matter how deserved it is (Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11). He rejoices in repentance and obedience to the only way of life that is right and good—His way (Isaiah 48:17-18).

Interestingly, distinct from the three categories of national punishment, Ezekiel was to take a few strands of hair and tuck them safely away in the edge of his garment (Ezekiel 5:3). These hairs symbolized a special, select group. The Hebrew word translated "edge" is sometimes translated "wings," as a marginal reference in the King James Version notes. To understand the symbolism, compare Psalm 91:1, 4: "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty...under His wings you shall take refuge." The meaning, then, is evidently one of divine protection. However, even some of those who are in this special group are to be burned up.

In Ezekiel's time, the protected group could perhaps indicate the initial captives who were resettled in Babylon—who experienced a measure of peace (compare Jeremiah 29:4-7). Indeed, these constituted Ezekiel's immediate audience. They did not have to experience the worst of the horrible destruction on Judah, in which Jerusalem and the temple were sacked and razed. Yet among these, some stubbornly persisted in wickedness and were killed as a result (compare verses 21-23). This, then, would have served as a stark warning to those who witnessed Ezekiel's prophetic actions.

What, then, of the end-time context? Regarding the last days, Jesus Christ gave His servants, true Christians, these instructions: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36). He later gave this message to His faithful followers of the end time: “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world [the Great Tribulation], to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10).

Yet another message shows that even some Christians will have drifted far from God and will require severe circumstances to shake them up and cause them to repent: “So, then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth... I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire [evidently the fire of the Great Tribulation]... As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent” (verses 16-19).

In Revelation 12, a “woman,” representing the Church of God, is taken to a place of protection from Satan the dragon (verses 13-16). But Satan then goes in pursuit of the “rest of her offspring” who, though they keep God’s commandments and testimony, are evidently not as faithful as they need to be at that time and therefore are not with the others in the place of protection (verse 17). (Of course, this is a very general breakdown. There may well be some faithful individuals who don’t go to a place of safety but are instead martyred, just as most of the original apostles and many Christians of later periods were.)

Thus it appears that those bound in the hem of the garment are meant, in an end-time context, to represent members of God’s true Church. Yet there are at least two ways of understanding this. One is that the collection of hairs initially bound in the hem symbolizes all Church members alive at the end time. Of these, some remain protected (those taken to a place of safety) and some are cast into the fire of the Great Tribulation (never going to the place of safety). The other possible way of looking at it is that the hairs initially bound in the hem represent those Church members who are taken to a place of safety in the end time. Of these, some remain protected in the place of safety and some are cast into the fire—losing that protection for some reason. The former seems more likely as the latter does not take into account those true Christians who do not go to the place of safety at all.

Of course, the major focus of Ezekiel 5 is the terrible calamity that comes on Israel as a whole—each third experiencing a distinct punishment as we’ve seen. The ancient fall of Jerusalem would be a shocking lesson to all the nations—as the future fall of all Israel will be to a much greater degree (verse 15). Let it be a lesson to us before the fact. We must take warning now—for any one of us could yet be part of one of the three dreadful categories presented here.

Let us be alert and pray regularly as Christ instructed in Luke 21:36, so that we may be counted worthy to escape what is coming—and to remain sheltered under the wings of the Almighty. Indeed, in our prayers we should specifically ask for His protection, as many biblical examples illustrate. Yet let us pray this for the right reasons. Jesus taught that preserving our physical lives should not be the reason for seeking protection. We must be willing to give up our lives for our convictions if need be (Matthew 16:25). We seek protection so that we may continue to serve God and care for others—and to continue growing in the kind of character God desires of us. Our ultimate goal is eternal life in His Kingdom. That is the only lasting and impregnable security.

“In All Your Dwelling Places the Cities Shall Be Laid Waste” (Ezekiel 6)

At this point we have the first instance of God temporarily removing Ezekiel’s muteness during the mock siege representing punishment on Israel and Judah. That it was still ongoing here is clear from the fact that Ezekiel 8:1 is dated to 13 months past the siege beginning (so the 430 days are still not over even then). The prophecy of chapter 6 is given during the 390 days symbolizing the punishment on the northern tribes of Israel. That’s fitting, for the prophet is now to set his face “towards the mountains of Israel” (verses 2-3) and speak against them. In ancient times, the literal mountains of Israel would have been the hills of Samaria, to the north of Jerusalem. Yet the Israelites were no longer settled there. They had been carried captive by the Assyrians around 130 years before Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry began. And they weren’t at this time anywhere close to Ezekiel. Rather, the Israelites were hundreds of miles to the northwest and northeast of him. It is therefore evident that they wouldn’t have gotten his message—not then anyway. And there was no need for them to. There was no imminent threat to the existence of the kingdom of Israel at that time, as it had already been destroyed long before. And the scattered peoples of the northern tribes were not in mortal danger either. Ancient Judah’s destruction was certainly imminent, but why would that have been a danger to the northern tribes?

Some try to solve this problem by arguing that “mountains of Israel” and “house of Israel” in this chapter refer exclusively to Judah. But the whole context of the mock siege is that it is to represent a punishment on the house of Israel and the house of Judah—clearly delineating between the two (4:4-6). Putting all of this together, it should be clear that Ezekiel 6 is a prophecy of the future destruction of the northern tribes of Israel in the end time. (In fact, all of chapters 3-7 can be similarly understood, realizing there is probably a measure of multiple fulfillments, involving the ancient destruction of Jerusalem and some historical periods of oppression endured by the Jews and Israelites.)

Figuratively, mountains are many times used in prophecy to symbolize nations. And it is indeed likely that the prophecy is directed to the numerous nations that now make up modern Israel—chief among them being those descended from Joseph—principally Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Of course, other features of the land are also addressed by the prophecy. Verse 3 mentions mountains, hills, ravines and valleys. Some maintain that these are simply cited as locations for pagan worship, as idolatrous shrines were everywhere throughout ancient Israel. That could well be, as these are all told that their places of worship will be destroyed. Recall that God had instructed the Israelites to destroy all the places where the pagans worshiped their idols: “upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree” (Deuteronomy 12:2; compare Ezekiel 6:13). The lower valleys were where the streams ran and the green trees were located.

However, these natural features are also told that their cities will be destroyed, which makes little sense for a ravine. Considering that mountains symbolize nations, the other features could be symbolic as well. Hills might mean smaller nations (compare Isaiah 2:2). Ravines and valleys in this usage could perhaps signify Israelite populations in countries where they are not the majority and not in power (such as the English colonial descendants in Zimbabwe and South Africa). They too will suffer God’s coming judgment.

Idolatry is the chief sin listed. The Hebrew word the book of Ezekiel uses most often for “idol,” as in 6:4, is *gillul*, a term derived from *gel*, meaning “dung pellets,” showing how detestable and disgusting they are to God (the same word was used in Jeremiah 50:2, as noted in the Bible Reading Program). In an end-time context, there is no question that idolatry remains Israel’s biggest sin—whether actual false worship, which is rampant throughout the nations of modern Israel, or the spirit of idolatry, exalting other pursuits or concerns above the true God. Even green trees are still significant as part of modern Christmas customs.

Ezekiel 6:6 tells us, “In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste.” Consider the destruction that befell Judah under Nebuchadnezzar: “Conditions in Judah must have been severe, for many Judean cities suffered during the Babylonian invasions. Arad, Lachish, Ramat Rahel, En-gedi, Timnah, Ekron, and Jerusalem are among the excavated sites showing evidence of destruction at this time. Only the region north of Jerusalem appears to have escaped relatively unscathed” (Holman Bible Atlas, 1998, p. 159). This utterly pales in comparison to what Ezekiel 6:6, an end-time prophecy, is actually saying.

What we are apparently being told here is that New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Toronto, London, Glasgow, Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland will be “laid waste”—obliterated. Paris, Geneva, Amsterdam, Oslo and Copenhagen may be wiped out as well. Perhaps we can now see how there could be such a huge death toll as that described in chapter 5. This appears to require the work of nuclear weapons or some other new superweapons—perhaps in conjunction with a bombardment of large meteors, earthquakes and other cataclysmic natural disasters from God (compare Leviticus 26:31-32; Deuteronomy 28:24). The prophesied destruction is utterly horrific and unimaginable. But, barring unexpected national repentance, it is going to happen—because of Israel’s sins. The rest of Ezekiel 6:6 tells us that this will serve to rid the land of its places of idolatrous worship (again, compare Leviticus 26:31).

We then see that people will come to realize that they have not been following the true God, as they will finally come to recognize Him for who He is (verses 7, 10, 13, 14). This will be the starting point for those who are left. Led away and scattered, many will finally come to loathe themselves because of their sins (verse 9)—the first steps on the road to repentance. He tells them to pound their fists and stamp their feet in a demonstration of grief and mourning while they lamented their national abominations (verse 11). If they had felt this way ahead of time, they would have been protected, as we later see in Ezekiel 9:4-6.

Through the proliferation of copies of the Bible, the modern nations of Israel now have ready access to this warning message Ezekiel proclaimed. Yet the vast majority of them still have no idea that they are the intended recipients of the message. We should all pray that the Israelite identity of the nations of Northwest European heritage becomes much more widely known as we approach the cataclysmic events that will shake the world at the end of this age.

Proverb 30

The Words of Agur the Son of Jakeh (Proverbs 30:1-14)

1. Confession of Agur (30:1-14)

(1) Subheading (30:1a). Just who was Agur the son of Jakeh? We really have no way of knowing. Jewish tradition and various interpreters contend that Agur is a pseudonym for Solomon, but this seems unlikely, as we will see.

Favorable to this belief is that Agur is usually translated to mean “Gatherer,” “Collector” or “Assembler”?thought to represent a teacher or perhaps the compiler of proverbs. However, the name could also denote “Gathered.” Jewish tradition (in the Midrash Mishle?a post-Talmudic commentary on Proverbs) is weak in this regard, as the name is identified with Hebrew ogar? referring to Solomon supposedly having “girt his loins” (gathered up his skirt in a stance of preparedness) with wisdom (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on verse 1). This seems a stretch. The later interpretation “Gatherer” fits the argument better. Jakeh is typically understood to mean “Fearing” in the sense of “Reverent” or “Pious,” though a few other definitions have been put forward. Thus, Collector son Piety is thought to be Solomon the Pious?the Jewish source cited above even labeling him free from sin (at the time Proverbs was written). However, some suggest that son of Jakeh (“Pious”) refers to Solomon being the son of righteous David. We might wonder in this case why Solomon would find it necessary to use figurative names, as other sections of Proverbs bear his name. Yet he does refer to himself figuratively in Ecclesiastes as the Preacher.

Evidence arguing against Agur being Solomon, besides the lack of explicit mention of his name as in the other sections of the book, is the prayer of Proverbs 30:7-9. Here Agur asks that God give him neither poverty nor riches because of the bad result each would lead to. This request makes little sense if it were coming from Solomon. He was the wealthiest king on earth?and God promised riches to him at the very outset of his reign. Indeed, by the time he was a wisdom teacher, Solomon was exceedingly rich.

If not Solomon, then, who was Agur Bin-Jakeh? Was this his real name? It certainly could have been. Yet it is also possible that it was a figurative pseudonym for another wisdom teacher besides Solomon.

Another word we should note in verse 1 is the one mentioned above translated “his utterance” in the NKJV and “an oracle” in the NIV. The Hebrew here is ha-massa, literally meaning “the burden.” This word was often used by God’s prophets in the Old Testament to designate a message from God that they bore?some think a weighty or heavy saying. Midrash Mishle proposes, probably in error, that the term is used here because Solomon bore the yoke of God (in generally serving and obeying Him). It is possible that Agur realized that he bore a message from God?or that later editors realized it and added the word. It is even possible that Agur was a prophet. However, the word massa is also used in reference to the message of King Lemuel from his mother in Proverbs 31:1. Yet there it occurs without the definite article (the), and some see in the term not a message but the name of the country of which Lemuel was king?especially as one of Ishmael’s sons was named Massa (Genesis 25:13-16; 1 Chronicles 1:29-31) and Assyrian records refer to an Arabian tribe by this name. Some maintain that Agur was also from this land of Massa , as the word occurs in Proverbs 30:1. The lack of the definite article in 31:1, however, does not necessitate massa being a national name there. It could still simply mean “burden,” or message, as we will see when we come to it. Moreover, the fact that the definite article does occur with the word in 30:1 seems to argue against this being the name of a country.

? Subheading Continued or Opening Statement? (30:1b). What about the latter part of verse 1? The New King James Version, following the Masoretic Text, renders it: “This man declared to Ithiel?to Ithiel and Ucal.” These are often regarded as Agur’s pupils, about whom nothing

else is known?just as with Agur himself. Ithiel is a name that occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament (see Nehemiah 11:7). It means “God Is With Me.” Ucal is not attested to elsewhere, but it would mean “I Am Strong” or “I Will Prevail.” Some, it should be noted see these as figurative names for Jesus Christ?related to the mention of God’s Son in verse 4?and that the l’- here before Ithiel should be translated “of” rather than “to.” But this seems to be reading too much into these words. The Greek Septuagint translation gives a variant reading of this sentence in which no names appear at all. If correct, it would mean that the vowel pointing of the Masoretic Text needs slight emending here. A number of scholars favor the variant rendering because the back-to-back repetition of Ithiel as a name would be unusual and because the variant fits the context of the verses that follow. This alternate reading is given in the margin of the NIV: “[This man] declared, ‘I am weary, O God; / I am weary, O God, and faint’”? reading la’ithi ‘El instead of l’ithi’el and reading va’ekel instead of v’Ukal (and reading ‘ekel as coming from the root kalah, meaning “to be finished,” “exhausted,” “dying,” “consumed”).

(2) Prologue: “The Limits of Human Understanding (30:1b-6)...TYPE: WISDOM TEXT Prologue” (NAC). The author’s declaration of ignorance in verses 2-3 is literary hyperbole. It should not be taken too literally or else this work should not have been included in the book of Proverbs. Furthermore, Agur shows in verses 5-6 and other verses to follow that he does have knowledge of God and His words. His statement, then, must mean that he is at a loss. He is stumped. “With the suggested reading for v. 1b above [about being weary], the meaning is that he has struggled to come to an understanding of the truth, and he must confess that he has reached his limit.... It is...both an acknowledgment of the limits of human understanding and a humble confession that only God is truly wise” (New American Commentary, note on verses 23).

In verse 4, Agur presents a series of rhetorical questions. Some see these as a poetic way of referring to God and His greatness?this being what has left Agur at a loss. Yet it should not be so hard to come up with God’s name, as it is revealed throughout Scripture (the name YHWH, meaning the Eternal or Self-Existent One, is even used by Agur in verse 9). The Son’s name is, of course, a different matter, and this has been explained in various ways. The Jewish Misrashic interpretation was that it referred to Israel . Christian interpreters have often argued that it refers explicitly to Jesus Christ. Some have said that it refers to any disciple of God’s wisdom.

Yet there may be another way to look at these verses. Some contend that the passage is meant not merely to show God’s greatness as an explanation for what has stumped Agur, but to point out that Agur’s difficulty is not unique since no human being has the full wisdom and understanding to comprehend God, as no one but Him has experienced the breadth of the universe or harnessed the full power of nature. In this interpretation, the rhetorical challenge to the reader is to come up with some person who has: “What is his name...if you know?” Clearly, only God fits the bill here?yet the idea might be, “Who, besides God, fits this description?” But, in that case, what is the point of saying, “...and what is his son’s name...?” Some see the whole question this way in context: “All right, let’s hear it. Come up with some all-wise, all-powerful wisdom teacher. Who is he? Prove there is such a person by naming his

son (his student who is a product of his teachings).” Seen this way, the idea appears to be that no such person or son exists.

However, there could well be more implied. After all, if the “who” here is a hypothetical person being measured against God, then would not the comparison include the matter of having a son? God Himself does have children who are His disciples. Agur himself was a student of God’s wisdom?yet he lamented his own lack of understanding. That brings us to the fact that God has a perfect Son, Jesus Christ, who also has the wisdom and power described here. The terminology of ascending into heaven and descending was even used of Christ in the Gospel of John (3:13, 31-33). Through God’s inspiration, Agur could well have been referring to Christ even if he did not understand the matter himself. Interestingly, Christ bears the name “Word of God,” and God’s Word (His revelation to man) is the subject of the next verse in Proverbs 30.

Verse 5 shows that God’s Word, rather than limited human wisdom, is perfect and reliable as a source of truth and help. And verse 6 warns against adding to God’s words (compare Deuteronomy 12:32; Revelation 22:18). As verse 6 of Proverbs 30 is Agur’s first imperative (words spoken in the form of a command), some see a new segment here, albeit one connected to verse 5 through the catchword “words.” In any case, verse 6 can imply more than just making up prophetic messages or false Scripture. The warning includes the danger of dogmatic pronouncements about what God says when these are based on stretched interpretations of revelation from Him?for instance, claiming Scripture means specific things that go far beyond what is written. We are not to put words in God’s mouth, as it were; these may turn out to be false, making us liars.

(3) A Prayer for Truth and Sufficient Blessing (30:7-9)...”TYPE: NUMERICAL

SAYING,Prayer” (NAC). Agur now turns in prayer to God?”lies” in this unit (see verse 7) being the catchword in advancing from the previous unit (see verse 6). The NIV Application Commentary says: “God’s words are true, but human words can prove false. So the speaker offers the first prayer recorded in the book, making two requests of God: to keep falsehood and lies [whether from others or oneself] at bay and to provide daily bread (Prov. 30:8; cf. Ex. 16:1-36). If there is too much, one can forget God in pride (cf. Deut. 8:10-18); if there is too little, one may forget God’s commands and steal (cf. Prov. 6:30-31)” (note on 30:6-10). Verse 9 shows concern for God’s reputation, instead of merely personal need, as the main reason for the requests here.

(4) Don’t Impugn a Servant to His Master (30:10).”TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB” (NAC).

The meaning of this proverb rests mostly on the definition of the word translated “malign” in the New King James Version. It may follow thematically (like an advancing catchword) from “profane” in verse 9, where the idea is to use God’s name unwarrantably. The word used in verse 10 means to speak bad about?to accuse. But an accusation can be true or false. Many take it here to specifically mean saying something false?slander. The Jewish Soncino commentary says, “Whereas slandering any person is a reprehensible act, it is especially vile when the victim is a slave, who is helpless and will not be believed when he denies the accusation” (note on verse 10). In this interpretation, the rest of the verse is understood to mean that one is then subject to a deserved curse called forth of God by the

victimized person?or somehow the lie is exposed and the liar is found guilty (or will be in the end).

However, others take the verse as a warning against telling a master anything negative about his servant even if it's true. The thought here is that the servant, who has his master's ear, can verbally retaliate against the accuser and lead to the accuser being found guilty in some way. In biblical times, a servant would have worked in a master's home or in his fields. So the caution, it is thought in this case, is against meddling in someone else's domestic situation? though it could perhaps apply today in not interfering in an employer-employee work relationship (compare Proverbs 26:17). If this is intended, it would be, as with other proverbs, a general principle rather than a hard and fast rule. For there could well be circumstances where the overriding law of love for neighbor might require you to inform an employer about some problem with an employee.

Yet there could be another interpretation of the words here in context. Consider the parallel construction of verse 6. In parallel, the "he" who might curse in verse 10 would be the master? just as God would rebuke in verse 6. Also note that in Agur's prayer (verses 7-9), he is concerned to not "profane the name of my God." Agur is here bearing a "burden" (verse 1), a weighty message?as the servant of God, it would seem. It may be that Agur is in verse 10 using a general proverb in a more specific sense of warning people against maligning him, God's servant, lest God curse them. Note that he follows in succeeding verses with issues of societal guilt. The point of verse 10 in context could be that people had better not accuse him before God over what he is about to pronounce, since he is bearing God's message.

(5) Four Evils in Society (30:11-14).”TYPE: THEMATIC, CATCHWORD” (NAC). The word“curses” in verse 11 shows a link with verse 10. There is some debate over the meaning of the repeated word “generation” in verses 11-14?whether it refers to everyone living at a given time, to a particular age group or to a class of people. Four dangerous social ills are listed here: dishonoring of parents (verse 11); self-righteous hypocrisy (verse 12); arrogant pride (verse 13); and plundering of the poor and needy (verse 14). Perhaps this is simply a group of sayings about how evil society is. The words may have been leveled at the people of Agur's own day, yet some have labeled the message a prophecy of the last days in line with 2 Timothy 3:1-7. Of course, these conditions have existed throughout human history?but they will sink to their lowest point in the last generation before Christ's return. It is interesting to note that there are four items here, since the next section in Proverbs 30, the numerical sayings, contains five lists of four. It may be that this list of societal ills is meant to introduce the numerical sayings?to point out the need of the society to hear the wisdom teaching that follows. Indeed, some of the things addressed in the next section are closely related to problems listed here?such as dishonoring of parents in verse 17 and pride in verse 32 (we will also note verses 15 and 20 in this regard in comments below).

“There Are Three Things...Yes, Four” (30:15-33)

Most of the numerical proverbs here list four items with the formula “three...yes, four.” As noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on an earlier numerical proverb, 6:16-19, this

kind of numerical progression enhances the poetry of a given saying, serves as a memory aid, builds to a climax and implies that there are numerous examples of the subject that could be given?the ones listed being only a representative few (compare also Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6).

(6) The Bloodsucker's Two Daughters and Four Insatiable Things (30:15-16). "TYPE: NUMERICAL SAYING, RIDDLE....Verse 15a, although actually a separate numerical saying [using the number two] from vv. 15b-16 [listing four items with the formula "three...four"], is linked to it by the common theme of insatiability. Also the numerical pattern of the two sayings together is 2-3-4, and this also serves to hold the whole unit together" (NAC).

A leech ("horseleach" in the KJV) is literally a bloodsucking worm?though some, based on linguistics and Middle Eastern traditions, have thought that the word ?alukah here could refer to a demonic ghoul or vampire. There are, of course, no real vampires as portrayed in folklore and horror stories. Yet there have been, and still are, demonically influenced people who act like vampires. On the other hand, the idea here could be one of using a popular myth to make a moral point (implying nothing about the reality of the mentioned creature).

For those who understand the word in question to mean the parasitic worm, the two "daughters"?either each named "Give" or each crying "Give!" (always wanting more)?are typically thought to be the leech's two suckers, one at each end. While "daughters" perhaps seems an odd figurative label for the mouths of a creature, we might consider this a reversed form of the modern metaphor of referring to children as mouths to feed. Accepting this interpretation, some see the verse as a simple observation about something in nature that is not satisfied?parallel to other items that follow.

Yet the word "leech" could probably refer figuratively to a type of person?just as it does today. Even if something like "vampire" is intended, the usage would still almost certainly be figurative in the same way the word leech could be?the reference in either case being to a "bloodsucking person," one who greedily abuses others in taking from them, or even a "bloodthirsty" person who would kill others. Indeed, note again the description in the previous verse of people "whose teeth are like swords, and whose fangs are like knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, and the needy from among men." These could be the vampires or leeches in mind in verse 15 (and this would be a thematic advancement from verse 14, similar to catchword advancements elsewhere in the chapter). In line with this interpretation, "daughters" could refer to the circumstances leechlike or bloodsucking people give birth to?others giving and giving still more (as the demand is never satisfied).

The New American Commentary says that "verses 15b-16 comprise a riddle. Although it is fairly easy to establish in what sense each of the four things is insatiable, the real question is what might be the reason this list is here at all.... The most reasonable solution [this commentary concludes] is that all serve as metaphors for the insatiably greedy or parasitic people" (note on verses 15-16). Some have noted in this regard that the images of the grave (similar to Proverbs 27:20) and devouring fire portray the parasitic people as menacing, while the barren womb and parched ground make them look desperate. On the other hand, the list of four things that are never satisfied here?death, barrenness, lack and fiery destruction?could conceivably be presented as ironic judgments on the never-satisfied, greedy people. Either way, note the A-B-B-A chiasmic arrangement of these four items.

“(7) The Fate of the Parent-Hater (30:17).... TYPE: INDIVIDUAL SAYING....This verse conspicuously looks back to v. 11 (as perhaps vv. 15-16 look back to v. 14)” (NAC). In this graphic warning, those who are disobedient to parents end up as carrion for birds. This could imply a violent death away from home, falling in the open, so that their bodies are not buried quickly or cared for. Or it might imply some sort of public punishment such as hanging or impalement, with the body left exposed in the open as an example and warning to others. Those who shun parental discipline, getting into all sorts of trouble, are more likely to meet with such consequences. Recall that obedience to parents is a prescription for long life (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). Interestingly, the Bible elsewhere warned in similar terms of ancient and future destruction on rebellious generations defying God, their supreme Parent (see Jeremiah 7:33; 15:3; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20; Ezekiel 29:5; 32:4; 39:4, 17; Revelation 19:17, 21).

The mention of eagles in Proverbs 30:17 serves as a catchword link to the next segment (verses 18-20), which mentions an eagle.

(8) Four Awesome Ways and an Awful Way (30:18-20)....TYPE: NUMERICAL SAYING, [Catchword,] RIDDLE” (NAC). The word in verse 18 translated “wonderful” in the NKJV is used in the sense of invoking wonder?“amazing” (NIV). The four aspects of nature to follow are very mysterious?beyond the author’s comprehension. This perhaps ties back to Agur’s opening prologue expressing the limits of his own human understanding when faced with God’s greatness (verses 1-6).

As to what the four “ways” (courses of action) here have in common, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary notes: ” Suggestions for a common theme include the following: all four things are hidden from continued observation, for they are there in majestic form and then are gone, not leaving a trace [that is, none leaves a track that can be readily followed]; they all have a mysterious means of propulsion or motivation; they all describe the movement of one thing within the sphere or domain of another; or the first three serve as illustrations of the fourth and greatest wonder?it concerns human relations and is slightly different than the first three” (note on verses 18-19).

The NIV Application Commentary observes that the first three name the elements of creation (heavens, earth and sea) and points out that each named traveler makes its way through its part of the created order?the implication being that the last course listed is within the bounds of proper domain as well. There are those who see the male-female relationship here as an illicit one (a one-night stand leaving no trace) parallel to that in the verse that follows (verse 20), but it seems much more likely that the relationship at the end of verse 19 is meant in a positive sense?the course of true love (which is difficult to trace)?and that the one in verse 20 contrasts with it.

More specifically regarding the relations at the end of verse 19, which does seem to be the main focus in the list, “the term ?almah (?maiden’ [NIV]) does not in and of itself mean ?virgin’ [as in the NKJV] but rather describes a young woman who is sexually ready for marriage. What is in view here is the wonder of human sexuality, for the [Hebrew] preposition be suggests that the ?way of a man’ is either ‘with’ or ‘in’ the ?almah. This mystery might begin with the manner of obtaining the love of the woman but focuses on the most intimate part of human relationships. So the most intimate moments of love are at the heart of what the

sage considers to be wonderful” (same note). The Zondervan NIV Study Bible says that the reference is probably to “the mystery of courting and how it leads to consummation” (note on verse 19). This theme is well illustrated in the Song of Solomon.

Verse 20 is related to the verses before, as it likewise uses the catchword “way” and concerns sexual relations?in this case out of step with the created order. As Expositor’s comments:

“Equally amazing is the insensitivity of the adulteress to sin. That this verse was placed here lends support to the idea that the previous verse is focusing on sexual intimacy in marriage; for just as that is incomprehensible (filling one with wonder), so is the way that human nature has distorted and ruined it....The portrayal is one of an amoral woman more than an immoral one....The act of adultery is as unremarkable to her as a meal.... [It could be pertinent that] the imagery of eating and wiping her mouth is euphemistic for sexual activity (see 9:17). It is incredible that human beings can engage in sin and then so easily dismiss any sense of guilt or responsibility, perhaps by rationalizing the deeds or perhaps through a calloused indifference to what the will of the Lord is for sexuality” (note on verse 20). This attitude may well refer back to verse 12 concerning the generation pure in its own eyes while not washed from its filth.

“(9) Four Unbearable People (30:21-23)....TYPE: NUMERICAL SAYING [WITH CATCHWORD]” (NAC). In this third of the “three-four” sayings, the Hebrew word *tahat*, meaning “under,” is repeated four times. The NKJV translates this word as “for” in verses 21-22 and gives no word for it where it occurs at the beginning of verse 23. It is stated in these verses that the earth is perturbed and cannot bear up under what is listed here. “Just as the ‘way of an adulteress’ (30:20) is out of step with the created order of wisdom, so the four items listed threaten to overturn that order. In ancient Near Eastern thinking, the earth shakes when the natural order is disturbed” (NIV Application Commentary, note on verses 21-23). Observe the parallelism in that the first two items concern men and the last two concern women. The first, second and fourth upheavals here in the proper order of things are fairly clear: “The servant, the fool, and the maidservant are all in unexpected positions of power” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verses 21-23). The first case is problematic because “a servant who gains authority over others has neither the training nor disposition to rule well” (New American Commentary, note on verses 21-23). He doesn’t know what he’s doing and may rush into abusing his authority. We saw this as a problem earlier in 19:10. That same verse also cautioned against luxury for a fool (compare also Ecclesiastes 10:5-7)?similar to the second listed item in Proverbs 30:22. A fool who is well-fed has too much time on his hands?allowing him to be all the more insufferable to others. Compare also the danger even for a wise person of too much food and luxury in verses 8-9. The problem in a female servant succeeding her mistress (i.e., the woman she previously served) is thought to either mean her inability to properly handle her elevation in stature (as in the first example) or her displacing, in favor and position, one who is already the master’s wife. Some point here to the gloating of Hagar when she became pregnant by Abraham, thereby upsetting Sarah and causing a household rift (see Genesis 16).

The third listed item is disputed. Note the word “hateful” in the New King James Version? following the King James Version “odious” (arousing or deserving of hatred). While some other versions translate the word similarly, various others translate the word as “hated” or, in

paraphrase, “unloved.” In the second interpretation (hated or unloved), the reference is thought to be to a married woman who is unloved to start with (such as Jacob’s wife Leah) or one who is no longer loved?the upheaval being her constant mourning, bitterness or even rage, the latter perhaps evoking to us the modern proverb, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned” (adapted from a line in a 17th-century play by William Congreve). Some who support this interpretation see the following chiasmic arrangement in the four items here:

However, this is probably incorrect. Note that the two center items here are thematic opposites of one another. And recall the statement above that the first, second and fourth items all speak of people being raised to unexpected positions. If the word in the third item is translated “hateful” (as in the NKJV) or “loathsome” (as in the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh), then the four items would be arranged in straight four-line parallelism?since this woman getting married would be another surprising elevation:

1. Male servant becomes king. ?2. Male fool is sated with food. ?3. Female repugnant person becomes married. ?4. Female servant becomes mistress.

Note that there may be some chiasm here in that the outer two lines concern the elevation of a servant while the inner two concern the elevation of a fool or repugnant person (which may be equated). The upheaval in the case of a hateful woman marrying should be obvious, especially given other verses we’ve seen about the contentious wife (19:13; 21:9, 19; 27:15). If a horrible woman manages to get married, husband and household look out (as well as extended family, neighbors and friends besides)?it’s going to be a rough ride for all. Perhaps she is related in theme to the adulterous woman of the previous segment (verse 20) and the women who sap strength from kings and ruin them in the next chapter (31:3)?and serves as a contrast to the noble wife given later in the next chapter (31:10-31).

(10) Four Small but Wise Creatures (30:24-28). TYPE: NUMERICAL SAYING. This particular listing lacks the formula of “three-four”?only mentioning “four.” The unit “is connected with the preceding by the catchwords ‘four’ and ‘earth’ in their title lines (vv. 21, 24), by ‘food’ in their second verses (vv. 22, 25), and by ‘king’ in vv. 22 [NIV], 27 and v. 28” (New International Commentary on the Old Testament, note on verses 24-28).

The little animals here provide important lessons for human beings about surviving wisely despite severe limitations. The repetition in verses 25-26 of “people” or “folk”?each a translation of the same Hebrew word ?am?and “king” in verses 27-28 “signals that these small creatures teach great lessons about being a people, asking ancient readers: ?What kind of people do you want to be?strong, led by a king? (cf. 30:29-31). You don’t need that as much as you need wisdom” (NIV Application Commentary, note on verses 24-28). Perhaps this is addressing the wayward generation or generations Agur refers to in verses 11-14?or is meant as a contrast.

As to the specific lessons, the ants, disciplined and industrious, prudently prepare in good times for the hard times (compare 6:6-8). The rock badgers (hyraxes or conies) choose wise shelter, providing for personal security. The locusts, with no king, succeed through unity, organization and cooperation.

The last creature is disputed. Some say a spider is meant?others a lizard. The KJV and NKJV are probably incorrect in saying that this creature grasps with its hands as the implied means

of its success (allowing it to walk on walls and ceilings), as that does not follow the pattern of the other listed items wherein the initial colon concerns a weakness. Other translations (such as the NIV) say that the creature can be caught (or crushed) with the hands of human beings, that is, this being the disadvantage it overcomes in nevertheless managing to evade even royal defenses and live in palaces. In reality, such a dwelling holds no meaning for a spider or lizard. The lesson is meant for us. The New International Commentary notes: "This conclusion points to wisdom's reward of living in a luxurious royal palace. If the son [or student of wisdom], whom wicked men and women want to capture, exercises caution, though as vulnerable as a lizard [or spider], he too will live in the chief residence of the realm (cf. Psalm 45). Paradoxically, the people of God who are foolish by the world's standards live in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1)" (note on Proverbs 30:28).

(11) Four That Proceed Majestically (30:29-31). NUMERICAL SAYING. This saying is the last of the "three-four" proverbs. The catchword "king" is used to advance from the previous unit to this one. Thematically, this unit appears to be a counterpoint to the previous one. The previous unit used small creatures to show that despite powerlessness and lack of kingship, success could come through wisdom. Here, on the other hand, through the illustration of more powerful creatures, we see that there is certain value in power and authority—a grandeur that should be respected. As the animals are used to analogize human reality, the king's royal power is the focus of the text. The word rendered "greyhound" in the KJV and NKJV is of uncertain translation. Other alternatives offered include rooster, war horse and starling. The point of the passage remains the same.

(12) Cease From Pride and Troublemaking (30:32-33). TYPE: ADMONITION, CATCH WORD. In the face of the obvious grandeur and power of royalty in verses 29-31, in this concluding unit the author (apparently still Agur) tells those who are guilty of exalting themselves and troublemaking to put their hand on their mouth, meaning stop it right then and there—before things get worse. As noted before, this may hark back to the generation lifted up with pride in verse 13, along with the other problems listed in verses 11-14. Verse 33 warns of the consequences of pride and evil-doing. Though this closing admonition is not a numerical saying, it is given in a threefold formula. Each of the three lines says "churning...produces"—as the same Hebrew word is translated "churning," "wringing" and "forcing" in the KJV and NKJV.

We should also note a play on the words rendered "nose" and "wrath," which come from the same root. The first two lines are figurative illustrations of the producing of strife in the last line. Consider that the churning of milk, initially a yielding liquid, causes a thickening that becomes harder and harder to push through—perhaps illustrating people ending up at loggerheads. And the wringing of the nose producing blood may imply that the strife of the last verse can involve bloody noses or, worse, bloodshed generally.

While this concludes chapter 30, we should recall from our opening comments on this chapter that it was likely intended to be read in conjunction with chapter 31.

Acts 26

Chapter 26 begins with Sovereign Agrippa granting Sha'ul permission to speak and make his statement of defence. Sha'ul's words state that he is blessed to be able to make his statement before Agrippa because he is very knowledgeable concerning the "matters" of the Jews (Pharisees and Sadducees). Sha'ul states his life story and experiences beginning with his position within the community of Pharisees. That from his youth, his life was that of a perfect example of the strictest sect of the observance of the Jews. He states that he in now being judged by his countrymen concerning his "expectation of the promise made by Elohim to their fathers," that being this belief in a resurrection. He asks the question to the listeners (Sovereign Agrippa, his wife, and others), "Why is it considered 'unbelievable' among you if Elohim raises the dead?"

He goes on to tell them that he was the prime persecutor, with the authority of the chief priests, of those of his nation believing in the Name of the resurrected Messiah of Natsareth. He put them in prison, stood by in approval as they were judged and stoned, and even chased them down in distant cities and when captured, forced them to confess and blaspheme against the Name.

He then gives testimony of his encounter with this Messiah Yeshua on the road to Damascus and how the following events lead him to a definite conversion of belief. He testifies he was given a mission to deliver the people and to go even to the gentiles, to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, and the authority of Satan to Elohim, in order for them to receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are set-apart by belief in Yeshua. So that is what he set out to do, and did! This is what the Pharisees found him doing in the Setapart place and they proceeded to try and kill him! He testifies that he has done other than what his heavenly vision gave him to do AND preaching none else than what the prophets and Mosheh said would come – that the Messiah would suffer, would be the first to rise from the dead, He would proclaim light to the people and the gentiles.

At this, even Festus could take no more and stood up and accused Sha'ul of being mad! But Sha'ul states he is most certainly not mad, that even Agrippa is aware of these truths for he is very knowledgeable about what the prophets foretold. Agrippa admits that yes, for just a little bit more teaching and he would be converted to be a messianic! Sha'ul states that his hope is that all in the room there at the court would become as he is – without the chains of course. They rose up and discussed things amongst themselves and concluded, "This man is doing none at all deserving death or chains." Agrippa says that Sha'ul could have been released at that time had he not appealed to Caesar.