S. HRE KIO

What does "YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS UPON HIS HEAD" mean in Romans 12.20?

Stephen Hre Kio is a UBS Translations Consultant based in Micronesia

> No, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him;
> if he is thirsty, give him drink;
> for by so doing you will heap burning coals
> upon his head." (Rom 12.20, RSV)

Frankly, I thought I understood the meaning of "you will heap burning coals upon his head" in Romans 12.20. But when checking with other fellow Christians, I found that there are differences in our understanding of the clause. And I am not certain in my mind exactly what it means either. GNB "you will make them burn with shame" seems to make the most sense, but is this in fact the meaning? And even if the GNB rendering makes the most sense, what is the overall meaning of the text?

Does this passage advocate a policy of punishment when it comes to how Christians treat their enemies? After all, to "burn with shame" seems to be a painful process for anyone to go through, even for an enemy. Is causing them to "burn with shame" the ultimate aim of the way Christians treat their enemies, even if the motive is love?

Interestingly, most of the English versions I have checked, beginning with the old King James Version, give a literal rendering of the Greek Text, thus giving us no help in understanding what it means; only three versions that I know of make an attempt to interpret the clause.

KJV for in so doing *thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head*
NRSV for by doing this *you will heap burning coals on their heads*
REB by doing this *you will heap live coals on his head*
NJB By this, *you will be heaping red-hot coals on his head*
NLT *and they will be ashamed of what they have done to you*
(Footnote: "Greek *and you will heap burning coals on their heads*")
GNB for by doing this *you will make them burn with shame*
GW If you do this, *you will make him feel guilty and ashamed.*

As seen in the above list of renderings, the **New Living Translation**, the **Good News Bible**, and **God's Word** have made some effort to say what the text means. The three of them emphasize the sense of **being ashamed** as the meaning of the phrase. All other versions maintain the literal rendering of the Greek text.

Even the *Translator's Handbook on Romans* does not say much more than what the GNB text does. It merely says, "The Scripture reference in this verse comes from Proverbs 25.21-22. The imagery of the last clause in this verse is difficult, though all translations seem to prefer to retain the imagery rather than change the metaphor into a non-metaphor. **For by doing this you will heap burning coals on his head** is perhaps best taken in the sense of 'for by doing this you will make him ashamed.' "

Paul quoted from the Old Testament

It is clear that in writing the text of Romans 12.20 Paul was quoting from the Old Testament, actually from Proverbs 25.21-22 which says:

> If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat;
> and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;
> for you will heap coals of fire on his head,
> and the LORD will reward you. (RSV)

Paul was quoting from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew text; and the Greek translation was faithful to the Hebrew text here.

We may reasonably assume that Paul's Roman audience would have understood him perfectly when he wrote, "you will heap burning coals on his head"; it was probably a common saying, a normal metaphor or expression at the time. But the meaning of the text is not clear to us today, because of the historical and cultural gap that exists between Paul's time and our time. Thus we need to find out its precise meaning.

Why was it that Paul left out the last line, "and the LORD will reward you", when he quoted from the book of Proverbs for his Roman readers? Was he trying to convey exactly the same meaning to his audience as the writer of Proverbs did for his readers? And what was that meaning? Or did Paul want to present a different meaning to his readers from that of the Proverbs, for this reason feeling it necessary to leave out the last line? These are questions it is difficult to find answers for, and biblical scholars present various answers to them.

The meaning of Proverbs 25.21-22

Not much help in understanding the meaning is given in most of the current Study Bibles beyond what we can understand in the text itself. But some efforts have been made, and here are two examples:

1) The **Catholic Study Bible** (NAB 1990) has this text, "For live coals you will heap on his head," with a note that says "*Live coals*: i.e., either remorse and embarrassment for the harm done, or increased punishment for refusing reconciliation. Cf. Mt 5.44; Rom 12.20."

2) The **NIV Study Bible** has this text, "you will heap burning coals on his head," with a note, "*heap burning coals on his head*. Horrible punishment reserved for the wicked (see Ps 140.10). Here, however, it is kindness that will hurt the enemy (cf the broken bone of verse 15) but perhaps win him over."

We note that these two Study Bibles offer two possible meanings for the text "you will heap burning coals upon his head": either revenge and punishment, or remorse and possibly winning over.

Can revenge and punishment be the meaning of "coals of fire upon his head"?

There are those who see in the expression "coals of fire" a threat of severe punishment. They hold that from the time of the Sodom and

Gomorrah narrative onwards, when the Lord "rained brimstone and fire" on the two cities (Gen 19.24), "coals of fire" could be taken to mean revenge and punishment, and that there are other passages in the Old Testament that clearly use "coals of fire" in this sense; for example:

Psa 11.6

On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and sulfur;
a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.

Psa 18.8

Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.

Psa 140.10

Let burning coals fall on them!
Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise! (NRSV)

(These Psalms certainly describe how the anger of the Lord came upon the enemies of the Psalmist.)

From the earliest times of Church history, this line of interpretation has had its advocates. Perhaps Chrysostom (347–407) was one of the most famous advocates of this position. He saw in this metaphoric expression a warning that punishment in the last days would be severe, precisely because the enemy refused to respond to the deeds of love showered upon him, (F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul to the Romans*, New York, 1883, page 439). Some attribute this view also to Origen (185–254). The strength of this view is that it does not spiritualize any of the elements of the figure of speech. It does not reduce the figure of speech to a simile.

This view also finds some support in 2 Esdras 16.53, which says:

Sinners must not say that they have not sinned;
For God will burn coals of fire on the head of everyone who says,
"I have not sinned before God and his glory." (NRSV)

Although the book of 2 Esdras was late, written after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, it proves nevertheless that this view was still held by some in the first century of the Christian era.

There are some scholars who hold this position, but give a different sense to the words. Dahood is one who sees that the text in question can be translated as, "Thus, you will remove coals of fire from his head." To him this is possible by taking the Hebrew preposition *'al* as "from" instead of "upon", and the participle form *hoteh* as "removing" rather than "heaping". Dahood holds that "coals of fire" is a metaphor for "pains, afflictions" and that the meaning of the text would then be, "by feeding your hungry enemy and giving him to drink, you will remove a serious affliction from his head," (William Klassen, "Coals of fire", in *New Testament Studies, 9*, page 342). This view has also received some support from the belief that "upon his head" is an expression for receiving either blessings or affliction. From Proverbs 10.6, which has "Blessings are on the head of the righteous," it is possible to assume that afflictions are upon the head of the unjust.

Most scholars, however, do not accept this view, whether as literal revenge and punishment, or in the sense of removing the pains and affliction from their heads. The greatest difficulty in this position of "revenge and punishment" lies in two areas:

1) Lack of Scriptural support. There is no warrant in Scripture for pleading the execution of God's vengeance as the reason for God's people to bestow kindness and generosity upon their enemies.
2) Lack of moral worth. If doing good to enemies proceeds from an aim of revenge, and is intended to humble an adversary, then this act of kindness loses all its moral worth, and is changed into selfish and malicious wickedness.

Granted that "The concept of 'love of the enemy' is absent from the OT," (*Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Ernst Jenni, Claus Westermann, vol 3, page 92), it is still contrary to the spirit of OT teaching to suggest that God's people can justly offer meals and drinks to enemies for the purpose of increasing their vengeance and punishment from God. In other words, such a negative aim cannot be maintained as the meaning of Proverbs 25.21-22.

If this negative sense had any validity for Proverbs, it would also be valid for the Romans text as well. Let us now see whether this NT text is capable of such an interpretation.

The context of Roman 12

The most crucial aspect of reaching a right understanding of any text is to examine its context. James D.G. Dunn (**Romans**, volume 2, *Word Biblical Commentary*, pages 706–781), has outlined the two chapters of Romans 12–13 as follows:

A. The Basis for Responsible Living – Christian Worship (12.1-2)
B. The Body of Christ as the Social Context of Faith (12.3-8)
C. Love as the Norm for Social Relationships (12.9-21)
D. Live as Good Citizens (13.1-7)
E. Love of Neighbor as the Fulfillment of the Law (13.8-10)
F. The Imminence of the End as Spur (13.11-14)

It is worth noticing that in Romans 12.9-21, in which the relevant text is located, "Love" is the foundation on which all social relationships should be based. And many other scholars have joined Dunn in taking this position. (For example, V.P. Furnish: *Love Command in the New Testament*; L. Schottroff: "Non-violence and the Love of Enemies" in *Essays on the Love Commandment*; K. Stendahl, "Hate, Non-Retaliation, and Love" *HTR* 55, pages 343–55.)

Let us look more closely at the context of the saying in Romans:

1) All the verses from verse 9 onwards strike positive notes. To illustrate the point we pick up part of all the verses: (RSV)

– verse 9, Let love be genuine;

– verse 10, Love one another with mutual affection;
– verse 11, Do not lag in zeal,
– verse 12, Rejoice in hope,
– verse 13, Contribute to the needs of the saints;
– verse 14, Bless those who persecute you;
– verse 15, Rejoice with those who rejoice;
– verse 16, Live in harmony with one another;
– verse 17, Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
– verse 18, If it is possible ... live peaceably with all.
– verse 19, Beloved, never avenge yourselves,
– verse 20, No, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him;
– verse 21, Do not be overcome by evil,

If the negative sense of the saying is affirmed, that would also go against the positive tone of the passage as a whole. And Paul would be seen to be contradicting three of his exhortations: verse 14, "Bless those who persecute you," verse 17, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil," and verse 21, "Do not be overcome by evil."

Furthermore, the word *alla* in the Greek of verse 20, usually translated "but", is capable of other interpretations. *Alla* normally means "in contrast," and most probably this "but" is in contrast with verse 19, which says this about vengeance:

> "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God;
> for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' "

To read the contrast as, "Leave your enemy to God, but try to increase his painful punishment by your acts of kindness," strikes a jarring and uncomfortable note. Therefore *alla* is best taken as calling for an active and positive response to hostility, (by meeting it with acts of kindness), rather than as a passive response (leave it to the wrath of God). That is the apparent reason why many English Versions do not have the literal "but" for *alla*, but something else, like "instead." And this active and positive response should include the problematic phrase "you will heap burning coals upon his head."

2) This passage (12.9-21) has been recognized as soaked with the spirit of Sermon on the Mount. (C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pages 200–201; E. Kasemann, "Worship in Everyday life: A note on Romans 12" in *New Testament Questions of Today*). Jesus' sermon sounded the radical notes: "Bless those who curse you," (Luke 6.28); "Love your enemies," (Matt 5.44; Luke 6.27), "Pray for those who abuse/ persecute you" (Matt 6.44; Luke 6.27); "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" (Luke 6.29; Matt 5.39). These are echoed in the verses we are dealing with.

Paul had demonstrated how much of his thought was influenced by the Messiah he met on the road to Damascus. It would be most unlikely that, when making a reference to his Master's thought, he would stoop down and exhort his Roman audience to offer acts of kindness externally with the ultimate internal aim of vengeance on their enemies.

3) Earlier we raised the question of why Paul left out the last line of Proverbs 25.22b, "And the Lord will reward you." The only possible reason for Paul doing so is the suggestion that he is seeking to avoid any sense of self-seeking in the action advocated. For Paul any victory won over the power of evil and temptation would be based not on human strength, but only on the strength of one who died and rose again. For he would say, "in all these things we are more than conquerors (only) through him who loved us" (Rom 8.37). If so, this would confirm that Paul understood any acts of kindness as an expression of outgoing love seeking only good for the enemy in line with the teaching of his Lord.

An Egyptian connection

In attempting to find out the meaning of the text concerned, Old Testament scholars have noted a connection between Egypt and the book of Proverbs. They maintain that Proverbs is the earliest of those OT books that are classed as Wisdom Literature, and the book of Proverbs is an anthology of earlier collections, (J. Terence Forestell on **Proverbs** in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*). Forestell maintains that "The origins of Hebrew wisdom literature must be traced to the court of Solomon, although the short maxim or *mashal*, the predominant literary form of the book, may well have its origin in earlier, popular forms of satire and clever observation."

An Egyptian religious practice: Scholars have pointed to the existence of a religious practice in Egypt from ancient times, certainly before the birth of Christ, known as the "repentance ritual". The literature on this practice was in "the demotic narrative of Seton Chaemwese in which the carrying of coals of fire on the head was a religious ceremony evidencing to the enemy the genuineness of the bearer's repentance" (Klassen, page 343; *TDNT* 6, page 945, footnote 86; *TDNT* 7, pages 1095–96). That is, the guilty person carried a staff in his hand and glowing coals of wood on a bed of ashes in a brazier or clay bowl on his head, and came to the party he had wronged to show the genuineness of his repentance. It should be noted that it was not the glowing coals on his head that brought repentance; rather "they are the outward evidence that repentance had taken place" (Klassen, page 343).

Did the author of Proverbs 25.21-22 have the same sense in mind when he wrote the phrase, "you will heap burning coals on his head"? There is a strong possibility that this is the case, considering the connection of Proverbs with Egypt we have just mentioned. This would mean then that the phrase "heaping burning coals on his head" is a symbolic demonstration that repentance had taken place. (We may also note here the fact that clay dishes which were believed to be used for the purpose of carrying coals of fire on the head have been discovered in Egypt dating prior to the "burning coals" narrative.)

A Biblical instance: In the story of the call of Isaiah (6.1-8), we read a similar story. There was a sense of recognition of his sinfulness – "Woe is me!" cried Isaiah, " For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips" – and perhaps a sense of shame as well, and receiving a divine response

of purging, cleansing and purification. A burning coal was taken from the altar and applied to his mouth with the assurance that "your guilt is taken away and your sin forgiven" (Isa 6.7, RSV). This is an instance of a connection between burning coals and repentance and cleansing. Like the Egyptian story, the story of Isaiah is a symbolic demonstration that repentance and cleansing had taken place.

Conclusion

In the light of the above analysis, it is reasonable to assume that Paul's meaning in Romans is the same as that in Proverbs 25.21-22. We might even suggest that Paul's meaning is similar to the meaning of the Egyptian "repentance ritual".

Two current Study Bibles take the same position that we have suggested:

1) The **NIV Study Bible** says this on Proverbs 25.22a, "you will heap burning coals on his head": "the expression may reflect an Egyptian expiation ritual, in which a guilty person, as a sign of repentance, carried a basin of glowing coals on his head. The meaning here, then, would be that in returning good for evil and so being kind to your enemy, you may cause him to repent or change."

2) The **MacArthur Study Bible** on Romans 12.20c, "you will heap coals of fire on his head," says: "Refers to an ancient Egyptian custom in which a person who wanted to show public contrition carried a pan of burning coals on his head."

L.O. DORN

IS GOMER THE WOMAN IN HOSEA 3?

Louis Dorn is a retired UBS Translation Consultant living in USA

Hosea was a prophet who had problems in marriage. These problems are described in the Book of Hosea as a symbol of the problems Yahweh had in his relations with Israel.

Chapter 3 has presented a puzzle to interpreters. Is the woman in chapter 3 the same woman, Gomer, mentioned in chapter 1?

> When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the LORD." (Hos 1.2)

The text in chapter 1 is in the form of a narration by someone other than the prophet. We see that this marriage took place at the command of Yahweh, and both Yahweh and Hosea knew in advance that Gomer was "a wife of harlotry." The Hebrew idiom, "wife of harlotry," can mean that Gomer was already a harlot, or else that she was destined to become a harlot; without further information from the context, we cannot be sure which interpretation to accept. A further question, whether the