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**— January 2007 – Part 2 —**

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
18-22 Jan	Production delay	No assigned readings
23-25 Jan	Hezekiah's Solomonic collection	Proverbs 25:1-27
26-28 Jan	Hezekiah's Solomonic collection (cont'd)	Proverbs 25:28–26:28
29-31 Jan	Hezekiah's Solomonic collection (cont'd)	Proverbs 27

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## Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

### First Part of Hezekiah's Collection Mostly Synonymous (Proverbs 25:1-27) January 23-25

#### 1. Subheading (25:1)

We now come to the second Solomonic collection of proverbial sayings in the book (Proverbs 25–29)—this one copied by scribes working under King Hezekiah of Judah around 700 B.C. We don't know if Hezekiah had them add this second collection to Solomon's earlier book of Proverbs—or if he established this collection as a separate one and later compilers joined both as one book.

It is interesting to note that the earlier collection was arranged with mostly antithetical proverbs up front (Proverbs 10–15) followed by mostly synonymous proverbs (16:1–22:16), while this later collection is arranged with mostly synonymous proverbs up front (25–27) followed by mostly antithetical ones (28–29).

It is also interesting to note some repetitions in the second collection. Hassel Bullock's *Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (1988, p. 158) lists proverbs repeated identically in both collections:

#### IDENTICAL OR SIMILAR PROVERBS

First Collection	Second Collection
<i>Identical</i>	
21:9	25:24
18:8	26:22
22:3	27:12
20:16	27:13
<i>Identical meaning with altered expression</i>	
22:13	26:13
19:24	26:15
19:1	28:6
12:11	28:19
22:2	29:13
<i>One line identical</i>	
17:3	27:21
15:18	29:22

#### 2. On Dealing With Kings (25:2-7)

“TYPE: THEMATIC, PARALLEL (24:2-7). Verses 2-27 form a major division of Hezekiah [i.e., the Hezekiah collection of Solomon's proverbs], and v. 16 further divides this section into two parts (see the discussion on v. 27).

“The proverbs of vv. 2-7 are all bound by the subject of dealing with royalty. They may have been placed at the beginning of the Hezekiah collection as a gesture of respect for the two great patrons of Israelite wisdom, Solomon and Hezekiah. The tone here is highly deferential to the royalty. In addition these proverbs are set up as three parallel pairs (vv. 2-3, 4-5, 6-7)” (NAC).

No doubt Solomon had himself in mind when he spoke the words of verse 2. God is glorified in creating all the mysteries of the universe, while kings have the honor of seeking and finding answers. Of course, all people have this privilege to some degree, but not on the scale of rulers and governments. This was particularly true in ancient times, when academic and scientific inquiry was more closely linked to royalty—as they had the time and resources for such undertaking. Solomon himself studied the natural

world of God’s creation (1 Kings 4:33). He also studied spiritual and philosophical matters, seeking out all the proverbs and other wisdom that he did.

Proverbs 25:3 says that the heart of kings is unsearchable. Given the vast information that rulers are privy to, it is rather difficult to discern the motives for all they do.

Verses 6-7 tell us it’s better to have humility rather than be humiliated. It is good to know one’s place, but if we don’t then we should humbly presume a lower station rather than a higher one and act accordingly. Jesus advised that the same deference be shown in other social settings, using the example of a wedding feast (Luke 14:7-11).

### **3. Settling Disputes Without Litigation (25:8-10)**

“TYPE: THEMATIC” (NAC). It’s best to deal with disputes outside of court in private or, if necessary, with an arbiter. Jesus similarly encouraged settling disputes out of court (Luke 12:57-59).

### **4. Fine Jewelry and Fine Counsel (25:11-12)**

“TYPE: THEMATIC, CATCHWORD” (NAC). In verse 11, “the ‘apples of gold’ are not golden colored fruit but are some kind of jewelry or artwork.” Besides the metaphor of jewelry and the importance of having the right words to say in both proverbs, we may also note the catchword “gold” in both.

### **5. Reliable and Unreliable People (25:13-14)**

“TYPE: THEMATIC, PARALLEL.... Both of these proverbs begin with some aspect of weather and its affects on an agrarian society; from that analogy they move on to the importance of personal reliability” (NAC). Verse 13 does not speak of actual snow at harvest time. That is incongruous (see 26:1) and could even prove disastrous. “The intention is the thought of snow’s coolness in the intense heat of the harvest season and its refreshing effect if it were available” (Soncino, note on 25:13). Just so, the person who carries out his duties reliably is pleasing to the one who assigned him. Compare misplaced confidence in an undependable person in verse 19 and sending a fool as a messenger in 26:6 (see also 10:26). In 25:14, those who fail to back up their boasts of giving in whatever capacity are a great disappointment. Moreover, this is a serious spiritual matter, as it involves hypocritical deception. In the New Testament, Ananias and Sapphira, who brazenly lied to the Church make themselves look good, were punished by God with instant death as a stern witness about the gravity of this matter (see Acts 5:1-11).

### **6. Be Patient With the Authorities (25:15)**

“TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB.... This proverb, describing the importance of patience in dealing with an authority, answers 25:2-7 (with its high regard for royal authority) in inclusio fashion and so serves to mark off 25:2-15 as the first major section of Hezekiah. The bones are the most rigid body parts inside of a person, and fracturing the bones here refers to breaking down the deepest, most hardened resistance to an idea a person may possess” (NAC). This is best accomplished through gentle persuasion over time.

### **7. Exercising Caution With People (25:16-27)**

“These proverbs are bound by the inclusio of proverbs on eating honey in excess (25:16, 27). They generally concern dealing with friends, family, and others; several focus on actions that are either inappropriate or paradoxically appropriate” (NAC).

“(1) Enough Is Enough (25:16-17).... TYPE: PARALLEL” (NAC). The example of eating too much honey in verse 16 shows that overindulging in even a likable thing can cause revulsion. There is a parallel here with verse 17, where visiting a neighbor too much can cause him to despise you—or, put another way, you can wear out your welcome. The link between these proverbs is even clearer in the Hebrew. “The parallel of...‘lest you have your fill of it [honey] and spew it out’ [in verse 16]...to...‘lest he have his fill of you and hate you’ [in verse 17]...is obvious, as the NIV translation indicates” (footnote on verses 16-17).

“(2) Beware of These People (25:18-20)... TYPE: THEMATIC.... All three of these proverbs are similes (although the word for ‘like’ is not in the Hebrew text), and all concern people one should avoid (the perjurer, the undependable, and the tactless). The point of each is evident” (NAC). In the last one (verse 20), “soda” refers to “sodium carbonate, natural in Egypt (see also Jer 2:22), which is neutralized with vinegar [—the effervescent reaction ruining the soda, which was otherwise useful for washing]. This would be counterproductive. It would be inappropriate and counterproductive to ‘sing songs’...to a ‘heavy heart’ [as this could, in a jolting way, churn things up negatively and prove hurtful]....One needs to develop sensitivity to others; songs may only irritate the grief. However, see the example of David serenading Saul (1 Sam 19:9); that was an exceptional case, but even there Saul’s response was

unpredictable” (*Expositor’s*, note on Proverbs 25:20). Also, David’s music in Saul’s presence was probably of a soothing and inspirational nature.

**(3) Overcome Evil With Good (25:21-22).** TYPE: INDIVIDUAL, FOUR-LINE PROVERB. Many believe that no directive to treat enemies with kindness was given in the Bible until the New Testament. Yet here we see the principle made explicitly in the Old Testament book of Proverbs (see also Exodus 23:4). Jesus may have been alluding to this proverb when he said, “Do good to those who hate you” (Matthew 5:44, see verses 43-48). The apostle Paul directly quoted from this proverb (Romans 12:20) and summed it up with the words “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (verse 21).

However, the exact meaning of the heaping of burning coals is disputed. Some take it to mean heaping future divine judgment on the person who won’t be reconciled even after being treated well (compare Psalm 140:9-10). But the act of kindness in this case would not truly be kind. It would be a way of seeking vengeance—and some understand it that way. Others take an opposite view, seeing burning coals on the head as a metaphor for meeting a neighbor’s need—the idea being that a neighbor would need coals for his fireplace to keep warm or for his oven to prepare food and that he would carry them home in a tray atop his head. Coals were indeed given in ancient times as a gift to the poor. Yet this seems an odd illustration of helping out a neighbor when feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty in the first part of the proverb makes that point quite well enough.

Many take heaping coals of fire to represent causing the recipient of kindness great pain—not in future judgment but presently in making him feel burning shame and remorse for his former mistreatment of the one now showing him kindness. This would hopefully lead to repentance. Interestingly, there was “an Egyptian ritual in which a man gave public evidence of his penitence by carrying a pan of burning charcoal on his head” (F.F. Bruce, quoted at [www.zianet.com/maxey/Roman25.htm](http://www.zianet.com/maxey/Roman25.htm)). On the other hand, besides “coals placed in a tray...carried as a gift to the poor or a sign of repentance...burning coals were also placed directly on the head to punish, to heal wounds, or to relieve suffering for a person dying of rabies!” (*NIV Application Commentary*, note on Proverbs 25:21-22). If such therapeutic treatment is in view in the proverb, the idea would be either something good being painful (the kindness causing shame and remorse) or something painful being good (the shame and remorse leading to repentance and reconciliation).

Yet another view is that the metaphor concerns the melting of metals with burning coals. As a hard metal is melted and made to flow by the application of burning coals, so kindness melts the hardness of an enemy. This would be somewhat similar to verse 15: “a gentle tongue breaks a bone.”

Whatever the exact meaning, the response to an enemy’s dilemma is the reversal of what would perhaps be expected—we are to lend a hand, as paradoxical as that might seem. The clear point of the proverb is that we are to treat enemies with kindness, doing what we can to bring peace and reconciliation, expecting a positive outcome (later if not now) and trusting God to reward us for obeying Him with the proper attitude and behavior in such circumstances.

**“(4) Cold Rain and Cold Looks (25:23)....** TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB” (*NAC*)—though there may be a thematic pairing with the next proverb. “Two sayings about anger and quarreling imply that paying attention to how one speaks can make a difference” (*NIV Application Commentary*, note on verses 23-24). Verse 23 contains interpretive difficulties: “The first is that the north wind does not bring rain in Israel [that coming more typically from the west]; the second is that the phrase ‘brings rain’ is literally ‘has the birth pangs of rain’ (which is subject to various interpretations), and the third is that the Hebrew does not make clear whether the ‘sly tongue brings angry looks’ or whether it is the other way around. Yet one could interpret it, with paraphrase, as follows: ‘As a cold wind gives birth to rains, so cold looks give birth to a storm of slander’” (*NAC*). Others see significance in the unexpected nature of cold rain from the north—paralleled with malicious talk getting an unexpected icy reception. Still others read the verse as referring to the north wind delivering up rain in the sense of stopping or repelling it—and that backbiting speech is stopped by angry looks.

**“(5) A Nagging Wife (25:24)....** TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB” (*NAC*)—though, again, this could possibly be thematically paired with the preceding proverb. Verse 24 is the first proverb in Hezekiah’s Solomonic collection identical to one in the major Solomonic collection (see 21:9).

**“(6) Good Water and Bad Water (25:25-26)....** TYPE: THEMATIC.... These two proverbs are linked by the implied idea of drinking water” (*NAC*). Good news coming “from a far country” in verse 25

may correspond to our modern English expression “from out of the blue”—meaning that it’s totally unexpected. Or it could denote good news about faraway relatives and friends after not hearing about them for an extended period.

**(7) No Glory in Self-Indulgence (25:27).** “TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB.... Verse 27 closes off the first major division [of the Hezekiah collection]” (*NAC*). Overindulgence in honey is not good. As we saw in verse 16, too much honey can make one sick. A parallel is drawn here with those who enjoy the sweetness of being honored and respected so much that they inordinately pursue the honor of themselves. There is no real glory in this—only dishonor and, as we saw in verses 6-7, the likelihood of humiliation. The double mention of glory in verse 27 (about what is not glory) parallels the double mention of glory in verse 2 (about true glory). “The chiasmic structure of the whole is as follows: glory (v. 2)/honey (v. 16)/honey (v. 27a)/glory (v. 27b)” (*NAC*).

## **First Part of Hezekiah’s Solomonic Collection Cont’d (Proverbs 25:28–26:28) January 26-28**

### **8. Portrait of a Fool (25:28–26:12)**

“TYPE: THEMATIC, CATCHWORD.... These verses describe the fool in all his destructiveness. The word for ‘fool’ is something of a catchword here as well, as indicated by its frequent repetition.

- **“25:28–26:2** The collection begins with three similes (25:28–26:2) on foolish actions” (*NAC*). The person without self-control (25:28)—certainly a foolish person—is vulnerable to destruction in various forms. Proverbs 26:2 shows that curses don’t happen by themselves. They cannot “land” (come down on people) without some cause. A parallel is drawn here with something else that cannot happen—a bird cannot land (literally speaking) if it is flitting and fluttering about. In context, the point seems to be either that fools are responsible for curses that come or that dealing improperly with fools—contrary to the warnings here—results in curses. As an example of the latter, “giving honor to a fool is not only inappropriate (snow in summer) but destructive (rain in harvest), as the similes imply (26:1), since he may think of himself as competent and actually try to take charge” (*NAC*; compare verse 8).

- **“26:3-5** These verses tell how one should speak to a fool” (*NAC*). Verse 3 implies that fools don’t respond well to reason. They are better guided, like work animals, through strict discipline.

Verses 4-5, as explained in our introduction to the book of Proverbs, are not hard and fast rules that contradict one another. Rather, they go together to illustrate the fact that proverbs are generalizations and that the specific circumstances must be evaluated to know which proverb applies. Consideration was given in our introduction to some modern English proverbs that seem contradictory but are nevertheless true depending on the circumstances. For example, “Many hands make light work” as opposed to “Too many cooks spoil the broth.” Both principles are valid, but the situation may call for one or the other. Even so, circumstances will dictate whether to apply “Do not answer a fool according to his folly” or “Answer a fool according to his folly.”

As *The New American Commentary* notes on these verses: “To ‘answer a fool according to his folly’ is to engage in the same emotional invective [or loud show or drawn-out debate] that the fool uses. On the one hand, one should not deal with a fool on his own terms lest the imitation of folly become habitual [or lest we appear foolish ourselves]. On the other hand, one *must* sometimes answer fools in the words they understand in order to reprimand them effectively”—or possibly to show others that the fool’s argument has not stumped us. Much will depend on the intention of statements made to us. Are these sincere inquiries or meant to trap us? Is the person willing to learn or is he belligerent and unyielding? Sometimes a sarcastic answer is appropriate. Jesus was masterful at knowing how to answer hostile questions.

The rabbinic solution to the apparent contradiction between these approaches, as given in the Talmud (Shabbath 30b) was to apply “verse 4 to foolish opinions on secular subjects which can be ignored, and verse 5 to erroneous ideas in connection with ‘learning,’ i.e. religious matters, which should be refuted” (*Soncino*, note on verse 5). Yet there is nothing in the verses in question to support this delineation, whereas the general circumstantial application, supported even by the Jewish *Soncino* commentary, explains the matter rather sensibly. Of course, the delineation mentioned in the Talmud is worth taking into account in a general circumstantial view.

- **“26:6-10** The similes in vv. 6-10 all concern how one should deal with a fool. They are arranged in a chiasmic fashion as follows:

- A: Committing important business to a fool (v. 6)
- B: A proverb in a fool’s mouth (v. 7)
- C: Honoring a fool (v. 8)
- B’: A proverb in a fool’s mouth (v. 9)
- A’: Committing important business to a fool (v. 10)” (NAC).

In the context of understanding verses 4-5, we may note that the wise consider not only what proverbs say, but how to properly apply them—unlike fools, who, as we see here, don’t know how to use proverbs appropriately and may even wield them dangerously (compare verses 7, 9).

The Hebrew of verse 10 is notoriously difficult. While the New King James Version reads, “The great (God) who formed everything / gives the fool (his) hire and the transgressor (his) wages,” the NIV reads, “Like an archer who wounds at random / is he who hires a fool or any passer-by.” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* explains that the first line “is difficult because it can be translated in different ways: *rab* can mean ‘archer,’ ‘master,’ or ‘much’; and *meholel* could mean ‘wound’ or ‘bring forth.’ The possibilities include the following: ‘A master performs all’; ‘A master injures all’; ‘An archer wounds all’; or simply ‘Much produces (wounds) all.’” The Jewish *Soncino* commentary, viewing the two lines of the proverb as contrasting, says that “the nearest to the Hebrew text is R[evised] V[ersion] margin, ‘A master-worker formeth all things; but he that hireth the fool is as one that hireth them that pass by’ (Rashi, quoting R[abbi] Moshe). The thought would then be: if you want a task accomplished, select an expert for the work; to choose a fool is like calling upon a casual passer-by without regard to his competence” (note on verse 10). *Expositor’s*, seeing the colons not as contrasting (with a ‘but’) but as synonymous (‘As...so’), argues: “The [first] line must [with the second] express something that is negative—an archer/master who injures/wounds everything. Anyone who hires a fool or a stranger gives them ample opportunity to do great damage. The undisciplined hireling will have the same effect as an archer’s shooting at random” (note on verse 10). The point of both these translations, unlike the NKJV rendering, is that important tasks should not be committed to fools, parallel with verse 6—which fits the concentric arrangement outlined above.

- **26:11-12** Verse 11, which illustrates that fools don’t learn from their mistakes, is quoted by the apostle Peter in 2 Peter 2:22 in reference to people who are led out of the sinful ways of this world and yet then return to their former evil ways. Wise people make mistakes, but one is a fool to keep making the same mistake. And Proverbs 26:12 “is an apt closure to this section. The quintessential fool is the one who is so sure he has all the facts of life straight that he refuses to submit to wisdom for instruction and is far worse off than the run-of-the-mill fool” (NAC). Recall from verse 5 that answering a fool according to his folly is sometimes necessary to *prevent* him from becoming wise in his own eyes.

### **9. Portrait of a Sluggard (26:13-16)**

“TYPE: THEMATIC” (NAC). “These proverbs about the lazy man have a ‘can you top this’ quality that provides comic relief.... Each one belittles laziness and the many outrageous excuses people often use to justify it” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 13-15). Two verses here are on the table of identical proverbs included with the comments on our previous reading. Proverbs 26:13 is identical in meaning to 22:13, and 26:15 is identical in meaning to 19:24. As the last proverb in the previous cluster concerned a fool being wise in his own eyes (26:12), so this cluster ends with a lazy person being wise in his own eyes (verse 16), deeming his sheer brilliance in avoiding work and productivity to be greater than the combined wisdom of a whole group of thinkers—when the fact that he believes this proves just the opposite.

### **10. Portrait of a Busybody (26:17-22)**

“TYPE: THEMATIC.... These proverbs discuss anyone who involves himself or herself in the affairs of others, who spreads gossip, or is a general source of mischief. Metaphors of violence and destruction dominate this text since these qualities characterize the aftereffects of the busybody” (NAC).

A person who injects himself into a quarrel not his own is likely to get snipped at and possibly hurt, represented here by the imagery of grabbing a dog by the ears (verse 17). Some take verses 18-19 as condemning any kind of antics, such as modern practical jokes friends might play on one another, but that does not seem to be the point here. As *The New American Commentary* says: “While practical jokes can be destructive and hurtful [especially if done maliciously with a view to humiliating someone as opposed to good-natured humor that the subject of the prank can himself laugh at later], the larger context here

implies that such may not be precisely the nature of the deceit implied here. Rather, this is a person who enjoys gossiping about or tampering with the affairs of other people. Such a person will purposefully confuse others and engage in a kind of social disinformation. When called to account, he or she will treat the whole thing as a game and be oblivious [like a reckless madman] to all the hurt such actions created” (note on verses 18-19). Another idea here might be slanderous jokes. Humor, such a political humor, is often a powerful weapon. And people know that they can better get away with derogatory comments if they are made in a humorous way.

Verse 22 is identical to Proverbs 18:8, warning the reader that while gossip tastes good like choice bites of food, it likewise makes its way to one’s innermost being. They have a corrupting effect on one’s heart and character.

### **11. Portrait of a Liar (26:23-28)**

“TYPE: THEMATIC.... This final ‘portrait’ rounds off the larger collection of 25:28–26:28. The fool, the meddler, and the liar are the three agents of social discord” (NAC).

Where the NKJV has “silver dross” in 26:23 (see also NASB and New JPS Tanakh), several modern Bible versions slightly emend the Hebrew to a meaning of “like glazes”—but this is not necessary, as silver dross was used for glaze. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* notes on this verse: “*Silver dross*...refers to the scum or refuse that is thrown off, or falls, in smelting silver (see 25:4). In the process of melting and purifying the ore, the silver, oxygen, and lead are separated, leaving lead monoxide as the silver dross. Because of its silvery gloss, this slag was used as a glaze for ceramics.” The point of the proverb is that a wicked person’s appealing speech conceals what he really is—which is expanded on in verses 24-26.

Verse 27 shows that those who lay traps for others will be caught in their own snares, an idea found elsewhere in the Old Testament as well (Psalm 7:15; 9:15; Ecclesiastes 10:8).

## **First Part of Hezekiah’s Solomonic Collection Cont’d (Proverbs 27)**

**January 29-31**

### **12. Boasting and Praise (27:1-2)**

“TYPE: CATCHWORD.... These two proverbs both begin with the same verbal root [the words translated “boast” and “praise” both coming from the Hebrew *halal*]. Behind both is the contrast between arrogance and humility.... The two verses together espouse an attitude of humility before the sovereignty of God and the judgment of the community” (NAC). Proverbs 27:1 is alluded to in James 4:13-16, where planning for the near future without taking into consideration unexpected circumstances that God may allow or bring to pass is referred to as arrogant and evil boasting.

### **13. Unbearable Personalities (27:3-4)**

“TYPE: THEMATIC, GRAMMATICAL PARALLEL.... These two proverbs strongly parallel each other in the Hebrew. Both concern behavior that cannot be endured” (NAC). As noted in our introduction to Proverbs, the wording of verse 3 about fools being heavy—i.e., hard to bear—is similar to a saying written later about grief in the Assyrian “Words of Ahiqar”: “I have lifted sand, and I have carried salt; but there is naught which is heavier than {grief}” (quoted in *Expositor’s*, introduction to Proverbs).

### **14. Honest Friendship (27:5-6)**

“TYPE: THEMATIC, CATCHWORD.... In addition to a common catchword [the Hebrew root meaning ‘love’], both verses concern the nature of genuine friendship” (NAC)—which is characterized by openness and honesty, including rebuking the friend if necessary for his own good. This is contrasted with hidden love (being too timid to be frank, more concerned with oneself being rejected rather than the welfare of the other person) and with an enemy’s deceptive show of affection.

### **15. Real Friends, Close at Hand (27:7-10)**

“TYPE: PARALLEL.... The four verses are arranged in parallel (*A B A B*) and generally concern forming significant friendships. Verses 7 and 9 both deal with pleasant substances (honey, incense, oil) and the paradox that what may seem bitter (bitter food or direct advice) can actually be sweet. Verse 8 decries the man who wanders far from home while verse 10 urges the reader to cultivate neighbors [near at hand] as friends to whom one can go in time of crisis [rather than relatives far away]” (NAC). By itself, verse 7 would seem to point out merely that those with much (in the way of good food or perhaps luxuries in general) get sick of it, no longer appreciating what they have, while a person with little delights in whatever he is able to get. Yet in context of the preceding and following verses the proverb could also

refer to friendship and counsel—perhaps a caution to be sparing in friendly advice, lest the recipient grow tired of it.

### **16. Fatherly Advice (27:11-27)**

“TYPE: THEMATIC.... Verse 11 is a fatherly plea for the son to heed wisdom similar to those that begin lengthy exhortations in Prov 1–9. If v. 11 does form a heading to a series of paternal teachings here (and is not just an interjection with no following material), one may ask how much of what follows may be placed under this heading. It is perhaps significant that vv. 12-27 for the most part concern matters about which a father might naturally teach his son: sound business practices and skills in dealing with men in the community” (*NAC*).

The first two proverbs here are nearly identical to proverbs in Solomon’s major collection (compare 27:12 with 22:3 and 27:13 with 20:16).

Proverbs 27:14 gives further counsel on friendship (in a similar vein to 25:20). A show of friendliness without proper social sensitivities can be obnoxious. Speaking of obnoxious, the following verse, 27:15, compares a nagging or argumentative wife to a constant dripping—as in 19:13. The next verse, 27:16, must accompany the previous one as it would be incomprehensible on its own. It is commonly understood to mean that a contentious wife is also uncontrollable—like trying to stop the wind or keep oil from slipping through one’s fingers. However, the Hebrew of the verse is difficult and the translation not certain.

The point of verse 17 about iron sharpening iron (e.g., an iron file on an ax head) is that friends are “sharpened” (made more effective in various ways) through close interaction with one another. This includes the rebuke and hearty counsel mentioned in verses 5-6 and 9.

Verse 18 concerns a servant or employee looking after his master or employer’s estate or business and receiving livelihood and honor from that source (symbolized by the fig tree). Ultimately, this would apply to the blessings and future reward of God’s servants for being faithful stewards in the work He has entrusted them with.

Verse 19 is subject to various interpretations. “The Hebrew could be more literally rendered, ‘Like the water, the face to the face, so the heart of the man to the man’” (*NAC*). The NKJV rendering of the second colon makes more sense if reversed, as we cannot see men’s hearts. The meaning would be that a man’s heart is revealed by the man—that is, the man (what we see of him, what he says and what he does) reveals what is in his heart.

The word “hell” in verse 20 is translated from the Hebrew *sheol*, meaning “grave.” A comparison is made here that is also a warning. As the grave and destruction are never full—being pictured as ravenous monsters that never seem to get enough since people continue to die and meet destruction (compare 30:16)—so the eyes of man, representing his covetous desires, are never satisfied. In the parallel, besides covetous being voracious, we may note that “the avaricious appetite of humans is compared to that which destroys” (*NIV Application Commentary*, note on verses 19-20). Thus the proverb may imply not only that people are greedy, but that having greedy eyes leads to the devouring of others and eventually the self.

The first line of verse 21 is identical to 17:3. In the previous verse the focus on the crucible concerned the refining process—compared to God’s refining of people’s character. Here the focus is on what the refining process reveals—the pure metals—the comparison being with the revealing of a man’s character by what people say of him. Of course, we must consider this in general terms. The righteous may well experience public censure over issues of righteousness (see Matthew 5:11), though some will nonetheless take note of good character (compare 1 Peter 2:12). Indeed, if we inquire of the right people about someone (those of good character who know the person in question), we are likely to gain a proper assessment.

Verse 22 contains another metaphor of processing natural materials—mortar and pestle rather than crucible. The point is that fools cannot be separated from their foolishness—showing the importance of being careful in choosing one’s associates.

Unlike the preceding short proverbs, verses 23-27 constitute an extended poem. The message here, though couched in pastoral terms, can be generally applied to one’s means of earning a living. “Take care of your business, and it will take care of you” (*NAC*). This is the reward for diligence.