

APPENDIX C

COALS OF FIRE IN ROM 12:19-20

Romans 12:17-21, in its majority, reads:

- ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil.
.....
¹⁹ Do not avenge yourselves, beloved;
but give place to (God's) wrath,
for it is written: 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord;
²⁰ but 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him (something)
to drink;
for in doing this you will heap coals of fire upon his head.'
²¹ Do not be conquered by evil,
but conquer evil with good.

Now, whereas the meaning of v. 19 is clear in its prohibition of personal revenge in the ethic of love and in light of the promise of divine vengeance, there is vigorous debate as to the meaning of Romans 12:20 as it follows on the heels of v. 19 and relates to the rest of the context. Two of the three principal positions¹ trace their lineage back to the early and eminent figures of Chrysostom and Augustine. The former held that the “coals of fire” referred to some future divine punishment that awaited those who spurned the Christian’s

¹ An untenable fourth is proposed by Dahood, who, although affirming that “coals of fire” is a metaphor for afflictions, argues that the preposition **עַל**, in addition to its usual meanings, could also denote “from.” Hence the phrase **כִּי גָחַלְתָּ אֶתְּהָ חֲתָהּ עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ** “lends itself to the translation ‘thus you will *remove* coals of fire *from* his head’.” Mitchell J. Dahood, “Two Pauline Quotations from the Old Testament,” *CBQ* 17 (1955): 21-22. However, this is appeal to a patently atypical use of the preposition, and runs counter to the witness of the LXX (and the derivative Rom 12:20) which translates the Hebrew **עַל** by the Greek **ἐπί**, unquestionably “upon.”

deeds of love. If the enemy did not repent at such grace extended, he summoned upon himself the sure judgment of God.² The latter held, however, that these “coals of fire” referred to the burning pangs of shame that the enemy would experience upon being shown such kindness, and which would lead to his repentance and reconciliation. In this he is followed by a majority of modern commentators, if one allows the third view (below) to be considered as a subset of the second. Cranfield, one of their number, believes that this latter interpretation is clearly to be preferred, “for it is congruous with the context in Romans, while the former interpretation is quite incompatible with it.”³ But if such a meaning is applied in this instance, it runs counter to the pattern of this image in Scripture.

The third view agrees with the second that the “coals of fire” is a positive image—not one, however, which is to be understood as “a burning sense of shame” as such, but one which harks back to an actual Egyptian ritual of repentance, known from the demotic Tale of Khamuas (or Chaemwese). In this narrative, the bringing of “a forked stick in the hand and a censer of fire on the head”⁴ were used to tangibly demonstrate repentance to the party wronged—although it is significant to note that in the tale itself the

² Cranfield, himself no advocate of this understanding, yet admirably relates the fuller position: Chrysostom “explains that Paul knew that even if the enemy were a wild beast he would scarcely go on being an enemy after accepting the gift of food, and that the Christian who has been injured would scarcely go on hankering after vengeance after he has given his enemy food and drink; and [he] goes on to say that to give one’s enemy food and drink with the intention of increasing his future punishment would be to be overcome of evil.” C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, ed. J. A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 649.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cf. F. Ll. Griffith, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis: The Sethon of Herodotus and the Demotic Tales of Khamuas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 32, 38, 121, 135.

repentance is more forced than heartfelt. Siegfried Morenz was the first to draw the comparison between this tale and the reference in Proverbs and Romans to the “coals of fire,” although the comparison is called into question on two accounts: (1) There is no mention of the “forked stick” in Proverbs 25:22 which is the alleged parallel to the tale, even though in that tale the two elements are inextricable. Moreover, Proverbs 25:22 makes reference to “coals” in lieu of Khamuas’ “censer”—a distinction of significance if direct borrowing is to be construed. (2) The composition of Khamuas dates to the middle Ptolemaic times—roughly 233/232 B.C.⁵ And although “the repentance ritual may antedate the literary document,”⁶ it is far from certain that it does so by such years as would place it in a Solomonic context (cf. Prov 25:1).⁷ Further—and earlier—support for an Egyptian provenance of Proverbs 25:21-23, however, may be sought from the Instruction of Amen-Em-Opet,⁸ the second chapter:

⁵ Siegfried Morenz, “Feurige Kohlen auf dem Haupt,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 78 (1953): col. 188.

⁶ William Klassen, “Coals of Fire: Sign of Repentance or Revenge?” *NTS* 9 (1962–63): 343.

⁷ Although this verse indicates that the proverb in question was copied and recorded for posterity by Hezekiah’s men, this only brings one about two hundred years closer to the Egyptian ritual (thus, yet five hundred years away). Moreover, the proverb itself is Solomonic (10th century B.C.) rather than Hezekianic (8th century B.C.), leaving the issue intact.

⁸ The Instruction of Amen-Em-Opet, dating roughly to the 12th–6th centuries B.C., bears a certain relation to the near context of Proverbs 22:17–24:22. It is uncertain, however, whether Proverbs borrowed its common material from Amen-Em-Opet, whether Amen-Em-Opet borrowed from Proverbs, or whether they both drew from a common milieu of wisdom material. Cf. e.g., *ANET*, 421-25; Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, TOTC, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 23-24; K. A. Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books of the Ancient Near East: The Factual History of Literary Form,” *TynBul* 28 (1977–78): 69-114; J. Ruffle, “The Teaching of Amenemope and Its Connection with the Book of Proverbs,” *TynBul* 28 (1977): 29-68.

He who does evil, the (very) river-bank abandons him,
 And his *floodwaters* carry him off.
 The north wind comes down that it may end his hour;
 It is joined to the tempest;
 The thunder is loud, and the crocodiles are wicked.
 Thou heated man, how art thou (now)?
 He is crying out, and his voice (reaches) to heaven.
 O moon, establish his crime (against him)!
 So steer that we may bring the wicked man across,
 For we shall not act like him—
 Lift him up, give him thy hand;
 Leave him (in) the arms of the god;
 Fill his belly with bread of thine,
 So that he may be sated and may *be ashamed*.⁹

It is to be granted that Proverbs 25:23, which directly follows upon the troublesome v. 22, seems to be more at home in an Egyptian rather than a Palestinian context, for it relays that “the north wind brings forth rain”—something true of Egypt but not of Palestine. However, although the passage from Amen-Em-Opet refers to such a wind and to feeding one’s enemy, the response of the enemy in the face of such kindness is “shame”¹⁰ rather than “stick and censer” or “coals of fire.”

In support of the first position—that the “coals of fire” represent divine judgment and that v. 20 is in large measure reinforcing the message of v. 19—are: (1) the grammatical structure of the verses in their apparent parallelism, (2) the context in which they are located, and (3) the development of the imagery from the Old Testament. Therein, the imagery of “coals of fire” is invariably used as a symbol of divine anger or judgment.

⁹ ANET, 422. The relevance of this passage to Prov 25:21-22 (and its quotation in Rom 12:20) is borne out in its advice regarding how one is to act toward an evil person/enemy (i.e., treat him with kindness, leaving the matter ultimately to god/God) and that person’s consequent response to such kindness.

¹⁰ As such, this passage correlates well with view two above.

For example, mirroring the imagery of Proverbs 25:21-22, from which Paul quotes, Psalm 140:10-11 reads:¹¹

10 רֹאשׁ מִסְבִּי
 עֲמַל שְׁפַתֵּימוּ יִכְסֹּמוּ:
 11 יִמְיִטוּ עַל יְהֵם גְּחָלִים
 בְּאֵשׁ יִפְּלֵם
 בְּמַהְמָרוֹת בַּל־יִקוּמוּ:

¹⁰ The *heads* of those who surround me—
 may he *cover* them with the *trouble* of their lips.

¹¹ May (*fiery*) *coals* fall upon them;
 may he throw them into the fire,
 into watery pits—may they never rise!

For the apostle Paul to utilize this potent image in a manner foreign to its common usage—and without any clear contextual indicators to that effect—would seem rather unlikely.

This would also apply to Proverbs 25:21-22, whose near context—the additional proverbs of Solomon in 25:1–29:27—does not express a coherent argument. These verses, therefore, stand alone as their own discrete context: “²¹ If one who hates you is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. ²² For you will heap fiery coals on his head, and Yahweh will reward you.” Verse 21 outlines what was to be the general attitude and action of the Old Testament believer toward one’s enemy in need. If Solomon indeed utilized this imagery in common with its accustomed usage in the Old Testament literature, verse 22 would be seen as a word of comfort: that the enemy’s enmity would not go unpunished by the divine Judge, and that the believer’s kindness in the face of that enmity would not go unrewarded. In this, it is granted that the enemy remained

¹¹ Cf. further Ps 11:6, emended; Ps 18:9, 13/2 Sam 22:9, 13; 2 Esdr 16:53.

hostile. That such an implicit remark is left out of the proverb is not to be unexpected, for proverbs by their very nature are characterized by conciseness.

Moreover, scrutiny of the structure of Romans 12:19-20 reveals a certain symmetry which suggests that the message of v. 20 is to be construed as complementary and essentially identical to that of v. 19.

¹⁹ μὴ ἑαυτοὺς ἐκδικοῦντες, ἀγαπητοί,
ἀλλὰ δότε τόπον τῇ ὀργῇ,
γέγραπται γάρ, Ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω, λέγει κύριος. ²⁰ ἀλλὰ
ἐὰν πεινᾷ ὁ ἐχθρός σου, ψώμιζε αὐτόν· ἐν διψᾷ, πότιζε αὐτόν·
τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ.

The commands in the larger context of Romans 12:9-21 are characteristically participial in form—stationed under, and serving to explicate, the summary heading of “genuine love” (ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος, v. 9). This prevailing structure¹² serves to bind vv. 19-20 together under the primary participial command: “Do not avenge yourselves, beloved.”

This primary command is counter-weighted by the two parallel ἀλλά phrases of vv. 19-20: “but give place to (God’s) wrath”¹³ and “but ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is

¹² This pattern is broken in only two places, if one excludes the summary heading and the concluding call: μὴ νικῶ ὑπὸ τοῦ κακοῦ ἀλλὰ νίκα ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ τὸ κακόν (v. 21). These are v. 14: εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς διώκοντάς ὑμᾶς, εὐλογεῖτε καὶ μὴ καταρᾶσθε, in which the repeated imperative is used to highlight this verse for its characteristic importance and as the fulcrum of the passage, and vv. 19-20. In these verses, the single participial command: μὴ ἑαυτοὺς ἐκδικοῦντες, ἀγαπητοί (v. 19a), is supported and expanded by what follows in vv. 19b-20.

¹³ As Schreiner observes: “The reference to God’s wrath and leaving room for it is exceedingly important in interpreting this text. When we believers are mistreated, abused, and our rights are infringed upon, the desire for retaliation burns within us because we have been treated unjustly. We are not to give in, however, to the desire to get even. Rather, we are to place the fate of our enemies firmly in God’s hands, realizing that he will repay any injustice on the last day. . . . This text suggests that believers will not be able to conquer feelings of revenge unless we know that ultimately there is justice, that God will set all accounts right. . . . Thus the recognition that God will judge our enemies is crucial for overcoming evil with good. . . . Believers are also to pray, of

thirsty, give him (something) to drink.” What the one expresses in a passive manner with regard to the renunciation of personal vengeance, the other expresses in an active manner with regard to the doing of good;¹⁴ in some measure, these deeds of kindness are compared to making room for God’s wrath. Furthermore, the primary command is substantiated by the two *gavr* phrases:¹⁵ “for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay,’ says the Lord” and “for in doing this, you will heap coals of fire upon his head.” This apparently intentional parallel structure suggests quite strongly that these “coals of fire” refer to the same divine and principally eschatological vengeance as expressed in v. 19.¹⁶

course, that God would bless those who persecute them (Rom. 12:14). This means that we pray for the salvation of our oppressors, hoping that they will turn from their evil and be rescued from the wrath to come. Nonetheless, we need to know (cf. 2 Thess. 1:3-10 for the same theme) that those who do not repent will experience judgment.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 673-74.

¹⁴ Cf. John Piper, ‘Love Your Enemies’: *Jesus’ Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Early Christian Paraenesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 115.

¹⁵ Although the second *gavr* is indeed part of the quotation from Prov 25:21-22, it yet functions within that quotation as a word of comfort in support of the actions of kindness. And within the structure of Rom 12:19-20, and the development of its argument, it functions in like manner.

¹⁶ Piper, ‘Love Your Enemies,’ 115. Likewise, Stendahl believes that it is unlikely that “the passage as it stands could reasonably be understood by its first readers in any other sense than as a word related to the vengeance of God.” Krister Stendahl, “Hate, Non-Retaliatio, and Love: 1 QS x, 17-20 and Rom. 12:19-21,” *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 352. This view is not, as many argue however, to be construed as presenting a fundamentally negative view toward the Christian’s enemies, as in the caricature: “do good to your enemy so that his punishment will be all the more severe.” James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 38B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 750. Rather, it is a positive word of comfort for the Christian in the face of stubborn and unrepentant enmity.

In addition, the immediate context argues for such an understanding. Indeed, the principle of Christian non-retaliation enjoined by Paul in v. 19a is explicitly based upon and motivated by “the deference to God’s impending vengeance”¹⁷ in v. 19b. The issue Paul is addressing at this point in the chapter is “how to act when all attempts to avoid conflict with the enemies of God and of his Church have failed”¹⁸ (vv. 17-18). In such circumstances, the Christian is to continue to respond in love, entrusting justice to the God who has promised to repay the impenitent. In this way, these verses are similar to what Paul had earlier addressed in Romans 2:4-5: “Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness and forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart, you are storing up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

Thus, implicit in the affirmation that the Lord will repay (v. 19), heaping coals of fire on the head of the enemy (v. 20), is the condition of continued enmity: “If the enemy remains inimical,”¹⁹ for divine grace is ever extended to the repentant. Within the larger context of Romans 12:9-21, then, vv. 19-20 function not only to re-emphasize what is to be the grounding ethic and characteristic activity of the Christian, but also to provide both a consolation to the believer in the face of stubborn enmity as well as a justification of

¹⁷ Stendahl, “Hate, Non-Retaliation, and Love,” 354.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Piper notes that “there is a very real sense in which the Christian’s love of his enemy is grounded in his certainty that God will take vengeance on those who *persist* in the state of enmity toward God’s people.” Piper, ‘*Love Your Enemies*,’ 118. Cf. the example of Christ in 1 Pet 2:23, who suffered without retaliation, because he entrusted himself to God who judges justly.

the justice of God in the face of injustice.²⁰ Christians are indeed called to seek the benefit of those who hate them (v. 14), but grace repeatedly spurned has the assurance of divine vengeance (v. 19).

²⁰ As Schreiner summarizes (*Romans*, 675): “The sure realization that God will vindicate us frees us to love others and to do good to them,” thus conquering evil with good (v. 21).