

Shepherds need to know the Biblical meaning of "iron sharpens iron"

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Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.
Proverbs 27:17 KJV

As I was completing the study on the Biblical meaning of "stubbornness" my attention was drawn to this comparison by a reviewer. Where the idea of iron acting upon another substance to cause harm was involved there, it seemed that perhaps this Proverb would provide a counterpoint; the positive force for good that is opposite the acting upon another for ultimate harm. In any event, it would seem wise for shepherd/leaders to know both positive and negative aspects of people affecting one another for good or evil.

The Life Application Bible has a footnote to this verse which seems to sum up the general understanding quite well:

There is a mental sharpness that comes from being around good people. And a meeting of minds can help people see their ideas with new clarity, refine them, and shape them into brilliant insights. This requires discussion partners who can challenge each other and stimulate thought—people who focus on the idea without involving their egos in the discussion; people who know how to attack the thought and not the thinker. Two friends who bring their ideas together can help each other become sharper.¹

In this particular Life Application Bible I also see the NASB translation which renders the verse in this way:

Iron sharpens iron. So one man sharpens another.

Indeed, this translation confirms the note that what is being described seems to be a positive affect that occurs between peers. While I have no disagreement with this observation, I also wanted to dig deeper and find out if our modern understanding of these words is the same as when the original words were written.

Definitions

¹ Life Application Bible, footnote to Proverbs 27: 17. Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Greater understanding of Scriptural concepts seems to involve being clear about what we understand words mean in our modern sense. This allows us to examine what we may have assumed was intended in the Scriptures, and then track it back to the contextual meaning of the Hebrew culture. Many times, we will find that our understanding needs to be adjusted away from the modern usage and back to the Hebraic concepts understood by the writers of Scripture in order to correctly understand what is being taught.

The operative words here seem to be: iron, sharpen, man, countenance and friend.

Let's check modern definitions for each of these terms. Merriam-Webster online dictionary is generally helpful here.

iron

Function:

noun

Etymology:

Middle English, from Old English *īsern*, *īren*; akin to Old High German *īsarn* iron

Date:

before 12th century

1: a silver-white malleable ductile magnetic heavy metallic element that readily rusts in moist air, occurs native in meteorites and combined in most igneous rocks, is the most used of metals, and is vital to biological processes — see [ELEMENT](#) table2: something made of iron: as **a** plural : shackles for the hands or legs **b**: a heated metal implement used for branding or cauterizing **c**: a household device usually with a flat metal base that is heated to smooth, finish, or press (as cloth) **d**: [STIRRUP](#) —usually used in plural **e**: any of a series of numbered golf clubs having relatively thin metal heads — compare [WOOD](#) 3: great strength, hardness, or determination

— **iron in the fire**

1: a matter requiring close attention2: a prospective course of action

sharp-en

Function:

verb

Inflected Form(s):

sharp-ened; sharp-en-ing

Date:

15th century

transitive verb: to make [sharp](#) or [sharper](#) ; *especially* : [HONE](#)*intransitive verb*: to become [sharp](#) or [sharper](#)

man (This one is *especially* thorough!)

Function:

noun

Inflected Form(s):

plural men \ˈmen, in compounds ,men or mən\

Etymology:

Middle English, from Old English *man*, *mon* human being, male human; akin to Old High German *man* human being, Sanskrit *manu*

Date:

before 12th century

1 a (1): an individual human ; *especially* : an adult male human (2): a man belonging to a particular category (as by birth, residence, membership, or occupation) —usually used in combination <council*man*> (3):

HUSBAND (4): **LOVER** **b**: the human race : **HUMANKIND** **c**: a bipedal primate mammal (*Homo sapiens*) that is anatomically related to the great apes but distinguished especially by notable development of the brain with a resultant capacity for articulate speech and abstract reasoning, is usually considered to form a variable number of freely interbreeding races, and is the sole living representative of the hominid family ; *broadly* : any living or extinct hominid **d** (1): one possessing in high degree the qualities considered distinctive of manhood (2)*obsolete* : the quality or state of being manly : **MANLINESS** **e**: **FELLOW**, **CHAP** —used as mode of familiar address **f**—used interjectionally to express intensity of feeling <*man*, what a game>2 **a**: **INDIVIDUAL**, **PERSON** <a *man* could get killed there> **b**: the individual who can fulfill or who has been chosen to fulfill one's requirements <she's your *man*>3 **a**: a feudal tenant : **VASSAL** **b**: an adult male servant **c***plural* : the working force as distinguished from the employer and usually the management4 **a**: one of the distinctive objects moved by each player in various board games **b**: one of the players on a team5: an alumnus of or student at a college or university <a Bowdoin *man*>6*Christian Science* : the compound idea of infinite Spirit : the spiritual image and likeness of God : the full representation of Mind7 *often capitalized* : **POLICE** <when I heard the siren, I knew it was the *Man* — *American Speech*>8*often capitalized* : the white establishment : white society <surprise that any black...should take on so about The *Man* — Peter Goldman>9: one extremely fond of or devoted to something specified <strictly a vanilla ice cream *man*>

— **man-less** \ˈman-ləs\ *adjective*

— **man-like** \-,lɪk\ *adjective*

— **as one man** : with the agreement and consent of all : **UNANIMOUSLY**

— **one's own man** : free from interference or control : **INDEPENDENT**

— **to a man** : without exception

coun-te-nance

Function:

noun

Etymology:

Middle English *contenance*, from Anglo-French *cutenance*, *contenance*, from Medieval Latin *continentia*, from Latin, restraint, from *continent-*, *continens*, present participle of *continēre* to hold together — more at **CONTAIN**

Date:

13th century

1 *obsolete* : **BEARING**, **DEMEANOR**2 **a**: calm expression **b**: mental composure **c**: **LOOK**, **EXPRESSION**3*archaic* **a**: **ASPECT**, **SEMBLANCE** **b**: **PRETENSE**4: **FACE**, **VISAGE** ; *especially* : the face as

an indication of mood, emotion, or character⁵: bearing or expression that offers approval or sanction : moral support

friend

Function:

noun

Etymology:

Middle English *frend*, from Old English *frēond*; akin to Old High German *friunt* friend, Old English *frēon* to love, *frēo* free

Date:

before 12th century

f 1 a: one attached to another by affection or esteem **b**: [ACQUAINTANCE](#) 2 a: one that is not hostile **b**: one that is of the same nation, party, or group 3: one that favors or promotes something (as a charity) 4: a favored companion 5 *capitalized* : a member of a Christian sect that stresses Inner Light, rejects sacraments and an ordained ministry, and opposes war —called also *Quaker*

— **friend·less** — **friend·less·ness** *noun*

— **be friends with** : to have a friendship or friendly relationship with ²

Having examined each of these five terms from a modern perspective let's go through them for Scriptural understanding.

Iron: In this context, this word is Strong's #1270 from #1269 root word. The transliteration of this Hebrew word is "*barzel*". In the ancient Hebrew its consonants are *bet*, *resch*, *mattock* or *vav*, *lamed*. It refers to "iron as cutting, by extention an iron implement as (ax) head, iron." The probable root word is the feminine plural from an unused root, "to pierce". "Iron head" is the same word with two Strong's numbers: 1270 & 6523. Pictographically, it means something along the lines of "the head of the home/tent sharpens and guides."

Vine's Dictionary has no reference for iron in the Old Testament and just a simple reference to iron with the Greek word in the New Testament. TWOT notes that the word *barzel* was probably a Sumerian, or possibly Hittite, "loan word." Here there is confirmation of the military superiority of the Philistines due to their ability to temper iron. It is further noted that 20 of the 75 times this word is used, it is used in a figurative sense. These use iron as a reference to affliction, slavery, barrenness, and obstinacy.³

² Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, July 9, 2009.

³ Theological Wordbook Of the Old Testament, Harris, Archer, Waltke, Moody Publishers, Chicago, 1980. pages 130-1.

“Sharpen” is Strong’s #2300, *hadad*, which is said to be a primitive root meaning to be (cause, make) sharp, or figuratively (severe) be fierce, sharpen. This word correlates to TWOT’s # 605 which again confirms nothing more than the idea of making something sharp. From TWOT, we also learn that a “sister” word, #607, *hada* in the Qal stem, is said to mean “rejoice” and to “make glad or gladden in the Piel stem.” It is said that that the verb is used only once in this context in Psalm 1: 7, “Thou hast made him exceeding glad with thy countenance.” KJV. It is also used in the Qal stem in Exodus 18: 0 to describe Jethro’s rejoicing when he heard the report of Moses. There is some apparent controversy over the specific translation for Jeremiah 31: 13 which could refer to being happy or to rejoice. Though this is a sister word and not the same word under consideration in our verse here, I found it interesting that the use in the Proverb in discussion also carries a reference to having an impact on the countenance of another, since the understanding of Hebrew words is a process of building up layers of meanings to get the full import.⁴

Taking the Strong’s # 2300 over to the Ancient Hebrew Lexicon, we find that it correlates to # 1165B(v) which confirms what we have already seen. The ancient Hebrew root consonants are a het and dalet, which depict a tent wall and a door, speaking of “unity.” A wall separates what is inside from what is outside. It is noted that “only through a door can one enter or exit, uniting the inside with the outside.”⁵

“B” , a het and two dalets, indicates the meaning to be “sharp”—the two edges of a sword that meet to form a point. The verb usage again confirms, ‘sharpen, pierce.’ “Two or more coming together as a unity, the sharp edge of a blade is the coming together of the two to one point.”⁶

⁴⁴ Theological Wordbook Of the Old Testament, Harris, Archer, Waltke, Moody Publishers, Chicago, 1980. pages 264-5.

⁵ Ancient Hebrew Lexicon of the Bible, Benner, Jeff A.; VBW Publishing, 2005; page 118.

⁶ Ibid.

Man: The word used in this portion for man is transliterated as “*aysh*”. Here is one summary of its usage:

- 1) man
 - a) man, male (in contrast to woman, female)
 - b) husband
 - c) human being, person (in contrast to God)
 - d) servant
 - e) mankind
 - f) champion
 - g) great man
- 2) whosoever
- 3) each (adjective)⁷

Notice, that the first observation is male as in contrast to female, yet another observation is that it can refer to mankind, which is both male and female. It is Strong’s # 376 and is written with an alef, yod and sheen. Alef, for strength, Yod for hand and sheen for teeth or fire. When looking into the paleo-Hebrew, there is a connotation that man is morally sick, as in wicked and incurable; which is an apt description of mankind without Messiah.

“Countenance” is Strong’s # 6440 refers to the Hebrew word “*panyim*” which is a plural form of the singular word “*paneh*.” The singular use of this unused noun means “the turning of the face.” The part that turns is used in a great variety of literal and figurative ways. They range from “accept”, “believe” to “anger, against, employ, endure, favor, fear of.”

The Ancient Hebrew Lexicon number is #1382 H N, again transliterated as “*paneh*” with the consonants *pey, nun soffit*. “what turns back and forth;” as a noun, the face, also the presence of one through the sense of being “in the face of.” It is always written in the plural form. When this word is used as a verb, it would include three consonants: *pey, nun, heh*.

“Friend” is Strong’s #7453, from the root word, #7462 and is the Hebrew word, transliterated as “*rea*” or “*rah*.” This is said to mean an associate, more or less close, brother, friend, husband, lover, companion, etc. The Lexical Aid notes that it is used in a broad array; from just a superficial friend to an associate, to a close

⁷ Blue Letter Bible. “Dictionary and Word Search for ‘*iysh* (Strong’s 376)”. Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2010. 19 Nov 2010. <
<http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?strongs=H376> >

friend or lover. The root word it is from carries the meanings as follows: to tend a flock, to pasture, to graze, generally to rule; by extension to associate with. These terms are also to be considered: break, companion, keep company with, evil, entreat, fend, use as a friend, make friendship with, keep (sheep) (-er) pastor and shearing, house, shepherd, wander, waste.

It gets more interesting when we take it back to the Ancient Hebrew where the root consonants are: *resh, ayin*. This quite literally refers to “man watches.” The connotation is that of a shepherd watching over his flock, who are often his only companions. The root word taken back to the Ancient Hebrew is #1453; “one who provides and protects his flock and takes desire in them.”

While we know that sheep can never “become” the shepherd, and by extrapolation, we as “sheep” can never “become God”, we can also see that the shepherd nurtures and teaches the sheep and becomes a close companion with them, or in one context as noted above: a lover.

How interesting, too, that the word for “shepherd” in Hebrew has been applied to both men and women: Abel, Jacob, Rebekah, Rachel, David.

Human shepherds nurture, encourage, protect, sharpen, defend their flock, and develop close relationship with them. If humans can do that with one another, as morally corrupt and wicked as we can be, how much more would it be true that THE Shepherd, Messiah Yeshua, can sharpen and raise us up to be His companion!

This is one picture that Scripture provides for YHWH’s plan for all of mankind; personified in Israel in general, and Jerusalem more specifically; those who have “crossed over.” Just as Ezekiel gave us the picture of protecting and keeping “Jerusalem” until it was time for love, so do I see that this is how our Abba Father is in the process of rearing us up to become without spot and blemish, to be a Bride to Messiah.

And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee [when thou wast] in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee [when thou wast] in thy blood, Live.

I have caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field, and thou hast increased and waxen great, and thou art come to excellent ornaments: [thy] breasts are fashioned, and thine hair is grown, whereas thou [wast] naked and bare.

Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time [was] the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine.

Ezekiel 16: 6-8 KJV

May we accept His shepherding until we, too, are brought up to the time for love.

May we as shepherds understand this process in our own lives as we minister to others; sharpening their countenance and being sharpened in the process.