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HOW TO UNDERSTAND AND APPLY
THE OLD TESTAMENT



DeRouchie

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HOW TO UNDERSTAND AND APPLY THE OLD TESTAMENT

TWELVE STEPS FROM EXEGESIS TO THEOLOGY



Jason S. DeRouchie

FOREWORD BY D. A. CARSON

Proverbs

General Characteristics of Biblical Proverbs



The nature of this book allows me to touch on only a sample of the various Old Testament genres. The last that we are going to consider are the proverbs. A **proverb** is a succinct, memorable saying in common use that states a general truth or piece of advice. Cover over the right-hand column in figure 1.18, and go through each English proverb one by one to see how many you can complete. Tally your total on a piece of paper.

Lightning never strikes twice . . .	in the same place.
A chain is no stronger . . .	than its weakest link.
A leopard cannot . . .	change its spots.
A penny saved . . .	is a penny earned.
The bigger they are . . .	the harder they fall.
Actions speak . . .	louder than words.
No news . . .	is good news.
Don't bite off more . . .	than you can chew.
Don't change horses . . .	midstream.
Don't count your chickens . . .	before they're hatched.
Don't cry . . .	over spilled milk.
Don't judge a book . . .	by its cover.
Don't put all your eggs . . .	in one basket.
Don't put the cart . . .	before the horse.
Don't throw the baby . . .	out with the bathwater.

Fig. 1.18. Some English Proverbs

Every cloud has . . .	a silver lining.
Give someone an inch . . .	and they'll take a mile.
If a thing is worth doing . . .	it's worth doing well.
If at first you don't succeed . . .	try, try again.
People who live in glass houses . . .	shouldn't throw stones.

Fig. 1.18. Some English Proverbs (cont.)

How many of the proverbs did you know? If you got 16–20 correct, we will call you a “proverbial genius.” If 11–15, you are “proverbially bright.” If 6–10, you are struggling, and we will call you “proverbially dull.” If you got only 0–5 right, you are definitely “proverbially challenged.”

A number of features are common to all the proverbs listed in figure 1.18, and many of these features are also present in Hebrew proverbs, such as those found in Proverbs 10–31.

1. Proverbs are memorable.

In order to remember well, we need information that is (a) *understandable* in our language, (b) *manageable* enough to grasp, and (c) *rehearsable* enough to restate. Most proverbs are pithy, memorable, and poetic. Douglas Stuart uses the following helpful examples to draw attention to the unforgettable nature of proverbs:⁶⁵

- a. “*Look before you leap*” versus “In advance of committing yourself to a course of action, consider your circumstances and options.”
- b. “*A stitch in time saves nine*” versus “There are certain corrective measures for minor problems that, when taken early on in a course of action, forestall major problems from arising.”

The point here is clear. Proverbs are powerful because they are memorable.

2. Many proverbs are designed for specific occasions.

Proverbs are regularly situation-specific. They often present contradictory perspectives, with each proverb being correct in certain circumstances. Note the pairs of proverbs in figure 1.19 on the next page.

65. Fee, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 241.

1a. "Birds of a feather flock together."	1b. "Opposites attract."
2a. "Too many cooks spoil the broth."	2b. "Two heads are better than one."
3a. "He who hesitates is lost."	3b. "Look before you leap."
4a. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."	4b. "A man's reach should exceed his grasp."
<u>Prov. 26:4</u> . Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.	<u>Prov. 26:5</u> . Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

Fig. 1.19. Contradictory Proverbs

Proverbs supply the right word for the right time. Proverbs 25:11 declares, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver." Yet we read in Proverbs 26:9, "Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools." As seen in figure 1.19, proverbs can contradict each other, but this is only because some are limited in their use and designed for particular occasions. When we neglect the intended situation for a proverb, we might use it in hurtful, unhelpful ways. But when we use a proverb rightly and wisely, we will give life to those around us. So it is that "death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits" (Prov. 18:21).

3. Many proverbs address ultimate and not immediate truths.

Growing out of Israel's personal relationship with the living God (Gen. 18:24–25; Job 28:28; Prov. 11:20; 15:33) and the covenantal context of blessing and curse (Lev. 26; Deut. 28), one of the principles that guides Israel's wisdom thinking is retribution theology—what some have termed the *act-consequence nexus*. Notice the examples in figure 1.20.

1.	Job 4:8	As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.
2.	Prov. 22:8–9	Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail. Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.
3.	Prov. 26:27	Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling.

Fig. 1.20. Retribution Theology in Israel's Wisdom Tradition

4.	Prov. 28:10	Whoever misleads the upright into an evil way will fall into his own pit, but the blameless will have a goodly inheritance.
5.	Prov. 28:18	Whoever walks in integrity will be delivered, but he who is crooked in his ways will suddenly fall.

Fig. 1.20. Retribution Theology in Israel’s Wisdom Tradition (cont.)

All of these texts highlight that in God’s world, “you reap what you sow.” Nevertheless, numerous other proverbs identify that this harvester’s principle has many exceptions *in this life*. For example, the “better . . . than” proverbs clearly show that a simple act-consequence pattern does not always hold up in the present: “Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice” (Prov. 16:8). “It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud” (16:19). A number of other proverbs simply declare explicitly that in this cursed age, the righteous do not always prosper and the wicked sometimes do: “A gracious woman gets honor, and violent men get riches” (11:16). “The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice” (13:23). The “less fitting” and “number” proverbs declare the same thing—this life does not always work out according to the act-consequence nexus: “It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury, much less for a slave to rule over princes” (19:10). “Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up: a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when he is filled with food; an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maidservant when she displaces her mistress” (30:21–23).⁶⁶

Consider now the biblical proverbs in figure 1:21. While all offer truth claims, some of these truths (###1, 3, 6) are not apparent now but will be realized only in the future when God overcomes all evil and makes all things right.

1.	Prov. 10:27	The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.
2.	Prov. 11:20	Those of crooked heart are an abomination to the LORD, but those of blameless ways are his delight.
3.	Prov. 13:21	Disaster pursues sinners, but the righteous are rewarded with good.
4.	Prov. 16:1	The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.

Fig. 1.21. Sample Proverbs to Consider the Significance of Eschatology

66. Both the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 8:14 and the sons of Korah in Psalm 44:17–19 equally lament how retribution theology is more complex than it first appears.

5.	Prov. 16:4	The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.
6.	Prov. 16:31	Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.
7.	Prov. 19:21	Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.
8.	Prov. 21:30	No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.

Fig. 1.21. Sample Proverbs to Consider the Significance of Eschatology (cont.)

Proverbs that predict a certain outcome are not necessarily absolute promises *for the present age*, but they do express absolute, ultimate—even eschatological—truths that time will prove unless God intervenes for good or ill. Douglas Stuart offers the following three examples, which I have adapted for my purposes.⁶⁷

- a. *Proverbs 15:25*. “The LORD tears down the house of the proud but maintains the widow’s boundaries.”

Life and Scripture testify that there are arrogant people whose houses still stand and widows whom greedy creditors abuse or defraud. Accordingly, we read in Job 24:2–3, “Some move landmarks; they seize flocks and pasture them. They drive away the donkey of the fatherless; they take the widow’s ox for a pledge.” Similarly, Jesus declared in Mark 12:40, “[The religious leaders] devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” The point of *Proverbs 15:25* is *not* to declare a truth that always stands in the present but rather to assert a more ultimate principle: “God opposes the proud and cares for the needy, and he will eventually make all things right.” This principle is absolute, but in the present age there are many situations that counter it (see Heb. 2:8). We rest in hope, however, knowing that God’s disposition is toward the broken (Deut. 10:18; James 1:27) and that God will make all things right.

- b. *Proverbs 22:26–27*. “Be not one of those who give pledges, who put up security for debts. If you have nothing with which to pay, why should your bed be taken from under you?”

Does this passage teach that we should *never* buy a house on mortgage (a secure debt)? Will all credit-card debt automatically result in God’s taking away all your possessions—including your bed? No, the proverb teaches a single principle that is always true: “Debts should be undertaken cautiously because foreclosure is very painful.”

67. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 243–45.

c. *Proverbs 29:12*. “If a ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked.”

Does this proverb guarantee that a government official has no choice but to become corrupt if his superior (the king, president, prime minister, tribal chief, etc.) heeds the voices of liars? No, it simply instructs that “the ruler who insists on hearing the truth will help keep a nation’s leadership honest.”

In conclusion, our present lives are filled with many ironies and enigmas (see “הַבָּל” [‘Vanity’?] in Ecclesiastes” in chapter 7). Nevertheless, we must still heed the call to walk in wisdom, because God, who is always just and ever constant, will ultimately punish the wicked and uphold the righteous: “Be assured, an evil person will not go unpunished, but the offspring of the righteous will be delivered” (Prov. 11:21). “Fret not yourself because of evildoers, and be not envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future; the lamp of the wicked will be put out” (24:19–20). “But these men lie in wait for their own blood; they set an ambush for their own lives. Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain; it takes away the life of its possessors. . . . For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster” (1:18–19, 32–33).⁶⁸

Reconsidering Proverbs 22:6



Now I want to relook at a proverb familiar to all parents—Proverbs 22:6. Regularly in my pastoral ministry and parenting I have encountered confusion regarding the meaning of this well-known verse. The whole verse has two lines, the first stating a command and the second detailing the consequence. Those who don’t know Hebrew may want to jump over this section, but I encourage all to keep reading.

תַּנְחֵם לְנֶעַר עַל־פִּי דָרְכּוֹ 6	Train up a child in the way he should go;
גַּם כִּי־יִזְקִין לֹא־יִסּוּר מִמִּנְהָ: b	even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Fig. 1.22. Proverbs 22:6 in the MT and ESV

68. This same eschatological hope is set forth in numerous places through the Writings (e.g., Job 19:25; 30:23; Pss. 5:11–12[H12–13]; 21:3, 6[H4, 7]; 24:5; 29:11; 67:1, 6–7[H2, 7–8]; 28:8–9; 72:17; 73:24–26; 109:26–31; 112:1–2; 115:12–15; 119:20–21; 129:8; 132:13–18; 133:3; 134:3; 147:13; Eccl. 2:11–13; 8:12–13). For a similar eschatological approach to the truths in proverbs, see Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 107–9.

1. Questions Arising from the Traditional Rendering

If you know Hebrew and read the text closely, two important observations become apparent as you read the traditional rendering seen in the ESV. First, in its three other occurrences, the rare verb **תָּנַח** that the ESV renders “train” refers to “dedicating” houses, whether of a man (Deut. 20:5) or of God (1 Kings 8:63; 2 Chron. 7:5). This suggests that the initial imperative is calling for parents to actively devote or commit their youth to a certain, perhaps even religious, course of action—intentionally and formally pointing their child toward magnifying the greatness, worth, sufficiency, and saving power of God.⁶⁹ The point here is that “train up” may be too weak and misses the potential element of consecration to religious and moral direction.

Certainly “dedicating” a child would include the common ceremony of commitment that many parents engage in at the birth of their children. Yet most of Proverbs addresses the parenting of teenagers, suggesting that the act of dedicating in Proverbs 22:6 is focused on an intentional, sustained, God-dependent shepherding of our children’s hearts as they grow into adulthood—one in which the children themselves are aware of the parents’ trajectory-setting intentions. This is not a passive calling for dads and moms.

Second, the ESV’s “in the way he should go” is a very idiomatic way of capturing the Hebrew “according to the dictates of [lit., the mouth of] his way” (**עַל־פִּי הַדְּרָכּוֹ**).⁷⁰ We could therefore translate the command line of the proverb, “Dedicate a youth according to the dictates of his way,” or, perhaps more commonly, “Dedicate your child according to what his way demands.”

2. Assessing the “Way” of a Child

So what does **עַל־פִּי הַדְּרָכּוֹ** (“according to the dictates of his way”) most likely mean? Significantly, in wisdom literature such as Proverbs there are only two “ways”—the way of wisdom and life and the way of folly and death. The previous verse declares, “Thorns and snares are in the way of the crooked; whoever guards his soul will keep far from them” (Prov. 22:5). Similarly, Proverbs 11:5 says, “The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight, but the wicked falls by his own wickedness.” Consider also Proverbs 14:2, which reads, “Whoever walks in uprightness fears the LORD, but he who is devious in his ways despises him.” And again, Proverbs 16:17 says, “The highway of the upright turns aside from evil; whoever guards his way preserves his life.”

Within Proverbs, the moral content of one’s way depends on the doer—whether God (Prov. 8:22), the wise (11:5; 14:8; 16:7), humans in general (16:9; 20:24), or fools (19:3).⁷¹ Significantly, a “youth’s way” is often negative. First, when left to themselves, the “young” lack judgment and have hearts filled with foolishness: “And I have seen

69. So Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 204.

70. The fact that **עַל־פִּי** is a Hebrew idiom meaning “according to the dictates of” is clear in texts such as Genesis 41:40; 43:7; Exodus 34:7; and Deuteronomy 17:6, 10–11 (ibid., 205n62). Cf. HALOT, 2:826, s.v. **עַל**.

71. So Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, 205.

among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man lacking sense” (7:7). “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him” (22:15). Second, without discipline, the young bring disgrace on their parents: “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother” (29:15). Out of this context, parents are thus exhorted to discipline their children and to instruct them in wisdom: “Discipline your son, for there is hope; do not set your heart on putting him to death” (19:18; cf. 1:1, 4; 29:15). In Proverbs the “way” of a child seems more negative than positive; it is the way without wisdom.

3. Cultivating and Shaping Potential

These texts could lead one to read Proverbs 22:6 as a sarcastic or ironic command that warns parents of the result of not establishing standards and boundaries for their children. A similar ironic command comes in Proverbs 19:27, which also begins with an imperative: “Cease to hear instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge.” If you read Proverbs 22:6 in a similar way, the principle would be, “Let a boy do what he wants, and he will become a self-willed adult incapable of change! Raise him in accordance with his wayward heart, and he will stay wayward.”⁷² I once read the proverb in this way.

But I now question this approach for three reasons.⁷³ First, the sarcastic reading requires a more passive approach to parenting that does not account for the verb **אָנָן** (“dedicate”), which expresses conscious intention. Certainly we as parents are always training our kids, even through our passivity. By failing to lead them to repentance before the Sovereign God, we teach them that they are fine to continue living as self-made kings and queens rather than servants. By failing to instruct them in God’s commandments, we teach them that God’s Word is *not* the highest authority in our lives. By failing to set boundaries, we instruct them that we really do not care whether they do good or ill. Nevertheless, this type of passive training is *not* what seems to be expressed in the imperative “Dedicate!” Rather, the sage is here calling parents to intentionally commit or orient the moral and religious trajectories of their youth.

Second, while the youth’s way is naturally negative *when left to himself*, Proverbs 22:6 pictures not a self-willed individual but one who is benefiting from *the intentional discipline and instruction of his parents* (“Dedicate!”). With this, the idiomatic “according to the dictates of his way” seems most naturally to express *the way that ought to be*. That is, every youth’s future is filled with possibility, and we as parents must recognize this and direct our child’s path toward God. This verse is about trajectories and potential, which suggests that the ESV’s “the way he should go,” while missing specificity, dynamically catches the point of the text.

72. For some interpreting Proverbs 22:6 in this way, see Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 197; Gordon P. Hugenberger, “Train Up a Child,” in *Basics of Biblical Hebrew: Grammar*, by Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 162–63; Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 41–42.

73. I am grateful to Bruce Waltke for pushing me to reconsider my understanding of this verse; I have followed many of his exegetical decisions on this passage.

Third, the consequence of heeding the command is that “even when he grows old, he will not turn from it.” In Proverbs “the wise, not fools, are crowned with the gray hair of age (20:29),”⁷⁴ so the proverb seems to anticipate a trajectory *toward wisdom*, not foolishness.

The consequence statement in Proverbs 22:6 implies that the parents’ intentional moral and religious shaping early on will have a permanent effect on their child for good. This statement is not a hard-and-fast promise to parents, however, for the rest of the book makes clear that the power of the youth’s future depends not only on the parents’ guidance but also very much on the choices that the child himself makes. The immediately preceding verse implies that the youth must guard his soul from those who are crooked (Prov. 22:5). He could choose to follow the wicked unto death (2:12–19), or he could heed the wisdom of his parents and choose the good paths of the righteous unto life (22:1–11, 20).

4. A Proverb for Parents and Children

While Proverbs 22:6 is framed as instruction to parents, the book as a whole gives guidance to the young (1:4). This fact suggests that Proverbs 22:6 was actually intended to call straying youth back toward the right way. If you are a son or daughter who had parents who worked hard to set positive moral and religious trajectories for your life (though imperfectly), you must not counter this trajectory by making foolish decisions today.

Proverbs 22:6 sets out a principle that time will prove true unless God intervenes for good or ill. As a parent, I rejoice in the directions given me in God’s Word—the Lord calls me and my wife to actively and intentionally dedicate our children to represent, reflect, and resemble the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Yet Proverbs 22:6 also reminds me how much I and my children fail, so I also rejoice in the power of the gospel to curb my own faults and the hardest of my children’s hearts. God in Christ makes those dead in sin alive (Eph. 2:4–5), forgives all who confess (1 John 1:9), and overcomes the old creation with the new (2 Cor. 5:17).⁷⁵

A Final Note on Biblical Proverbs



We have found numerous proverbs from all around the ancient world, but none of these call for the fear of YHWH. What distinguishes biblical wisdom from all the rest

74. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, 205.

75. For more on this proverb, see Ted Hilderbrandt, “Proverbs 22:6a: Train Up a Child?,” *GTJ* 9, 1 (1988): 3–19; Peter J. Gentry, “Equipping the Generation: Raising Children, the Christian Way,” *JDFM* 2, 2 (2012): 96–109.

is its affirmation that YHWH alone orders the universe, defines value, and clarifies right and wrong. The fear of the Lord provides the basis for wisdom because it aligns one with right order and provides the only proper disposition by which to live God's way. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life" (Prov. 9:10; cf. 1:7).

Throughout the Old Testament, God called people to fear him (e.g., Ex. 20:20; Deut. 10:12), but very few did, and the result was destruction. I find hope in the fact that Jeremiah predicted that in the new covenant God would supply the fear of the Lord by which we work out our salvation (Phil. 2:12). Hear the Word of the Lord in Jeremiah 32:40: "I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me." In this text God is promising to help every new covenant believer walk in the ways of wisdom.

Finally, biblical proverbs find their culmination in Christ, the one who is wisdom for us. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30, "Christ Jesus . . . became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (cf. 1:24). He is the ultimate one to whom Proverbs 30:4 speaks: "Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and *what is his son's name?* Surely you know!" The first name requested is most certainly *YHWH*, the one from whom wisdom comes (Job 28:23; Prov. 8:22; Eccl. 12:11). As for his "son's name," *son* in the book most commonly designates a member of the royal family (Prov. 1:1, 8; 4:1–9), who was to heed his father's teaching in order to align with the Deuteronomic ideal for kingship (Deut. 17:18–20). Thus, God's royal and wise "son" refers first to the imperfect Davidic offspring, but each of their lives served as a marker of hope for the more ultimate, perfect son of David (2 Sam. 7:14, 16; Ps. 2:7)—the one whom we now know as Jesus, the embodiment of wisdom. James tells us that for those in Christ, when we lack wisdom, all we have to do is ask, and God will give generously without reproach (James 1:5).

Key Words and Concepts

Genre and genre analysis

TaNaK

Principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation

Prophet

Oracle

Oracles of indictment, instruction, warning/punishment, and hope/salvation

Apodictic vs. casuistic laws

Criminal, civil, family, cultic/ceremonial, and compassion laws

Royal psalms

Psalms of lament, trust, thanksgiving, and praise

Proverb