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# Train Up a Child: A Re-examination of Proverbs 22:6

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This is a familiar verse for many of us, especially when we talk about parenting and how to train up a child from the biblical perspective. The verse is usually translated more or less as follows: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”<sup>1</sup> As such, this verse seems to say that if parents are able to train their children in the right way (God’s way), then they will not go astray, even when they reach adulthood.

However, in Hebrew, there is no equivalent for the English word “should.” If translated literally, the clause “in the way he should go” should be “according to his way.”<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the verb “train” in Hebrew is literally “dedicate.”<sup>3</sup> In this context, the dedication implies continual training with emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> This includes most of the common translations like NIV, RSV, KJV, and NASB.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* (TOTC; Leicester: IVP, 1964), p. 147; Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: The Westminster Press, 2001), p. 43. See also a discussion on this issue by Gordon P. Hugenberger, “Train Up a Child”, in Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 284-5. Bruce K. Waltke translated the clause as “according to what his way dictate.” See Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> In other occurrences in the Old Testament, the verb refers to dedicating a house (Deut. 20:5) or a temple (1 Kgs. 8:63; 2 Chr. 7:5).

inauguration and consecration. In the book of Proverbs, this refers to the moral and religious teachings.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, a more literal translation of the whole verse goes like this: “Dedicate a child according to his (own) way, even when he is old, he will not depart from it.” As such, the verse serves more as a solemn warning rather than a promise.<sup>5</sup> The main point of the verse is that if a child is left on his own, for example, if he is allowed to be selfish in dealing with others, he will remain as such even when he becomes old.<sup>6</sup>

Seen in this light, the teaching is presented in a sarcastic manner, which is not uncommon in wisdom literature such as Proverbs.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the verse emphasizes the importance of discipline. Another verse has a similar meaning: “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.”<sup>8</sup>

However, as noted by Douglas Stuart<sup>9</sup>, since this involves a familiar verse, usually the modern translations will try not to deviate from the traditionally accepted wording. After all, the traditionally accepted wording is theologically sound. I presume that is one of the reasons why most of the modern translations continue to keep it. Another reason is the fear that people will not buy a Bible in which the wordings of their favourite verses have been changed.<sup>10</sup> If you continue to adhere to the traditional view on this verse, it is alright.

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<sup>4</sup> Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*, p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> Hugenberger, “Train Up a Child”, p. 285.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Hugenberger, “Train Up a Child”, p. 285.

<sup>8</sup> Prov 29:15. Quoted from the RSV Bible.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> See Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, p. 43. This is attested by one of my former lecturers, Dr Graham Ogden, a retired Old Testament scholar as well as a translation consultant with the United Bible Society (UBS), who mentioned another similar case in Isa 7:14.

In translating the Bible from its original languages (mainly Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament<sup>11</sup>) into another language, there are some occasions whereby the translation may not be that accurate; but we should not doubt the authority of the translated Bible as the inspired Word of God, for throughout the different parts of the world, many lives of different people groups have been saved and transformed through the different translated versions of the Bible.

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<sup>11</sup> Both are quite different from modern Hebrew and modern Greek.