

PROVERBS 22:6a: TRAIN UP A CHILD?

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Careful consideration of lexical and contextual factors suggests that "train up a child in the way he should go" needs to be reexamined. The verb "to train" really refers to a bestowal of status and responsibility. The noun translated "child" denotes the status of a late adolescent rather than a child. "In the way he should go" is best understood as "according to what is expected." The original intent then of this verse addresses a late adolescent's entrance into his place in adult society. This should be done with celebration and encouragement—giving him respect, status and responsibilities commensurate with his position as a young adult. This reinterpretation necessitates fresh application of the proverb beyond the concerns of childrearing.

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Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov 22:6). This proverb has brought encouragement, hope, anxiety and guilt to countless parents who have faced the uncertainty and confusion of child-rearing. It has provided encouragement to those responsible parents who, after working to balance family, relationships and careers, find reassurance that all of their labors ultimately will not be in vain. This verse has also provided rays of hope to those who, having reared their child in the best way they knew, have had their hearts broken as their child rebels and goes astray. They agonize under the pain that God recognized to be one of the deepest sorrows of human existence (Mt 23:37; Hos 11:1-2; Prov 10:1). To those parents this verse gives hope that when he is old the prodigal will return. Another group of young parents, sensitive to daily feelings of inadequacy, experiences intense anxiety over the possible long-term damage they see themselves doing to their child. If the child does go astray, this verse seems to point the finger of guilt at them.

Assuming that Proverbs 22:6 is a proverb, and not a promise,¹ the first question of interpretation must be: "What did this verse originally mean when it was recorded in the book of Proverbs?"²

יָנַח: TRAIN UP OR INITIATE?

"Train up" is an initial verbal imperative, found only five times in the Old Testament. The tension between how this word is used elsewhere in Scripture and the alleged pedagogical, semantic component found in the translation "train up" (KJV, NASB, RSV, NIV, TEV [teach]) has been passed over by many commentators.

To Stimulate Desire

Since there are so few uses of יָנַח in the Old Testament, many have overemphasized etymology and ignored the cautions that Barr has so clearly articulated.³ With the recent psychological concentration on needs,⁴ there has been a renewed emphasis on the alleged etymological root of יָנַח, יָנַח (palate),⁵ and on an Arabic cognate (ḥanakun: desire). The Arabic image is of a mother preparing date jam which is gently rubbed on the gums of a newborn baby, thereby enhancing the infant's appetite for and ability to digest succulent condiments.⁶ Yet to suggest that the assumed etymological root determines or shades the meaning of the word in Proverbs 22:6 is like saying that when one uses the word "cute" it is shaded by its early

¹W. Mouser, *Walking in Wisdom* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1983) 13-14; J. Williams, *Those Who Ponder Proverbs: Aphoristic Thinking and Biblical Literature* (Sheffield: Almond, 1981); N. Barley, "A Structural Approach to the Proverb and Maxim with Special Reference to the Anglo-Saxon Corpus," *Proverbium* 20 (1972) 737-50; "The Proverb' and Related Problems of Genre-Definition," *Proverbium* 23 (1974) 880-84; and the classic work on the proverbial form and nature of the proverb, A. Taylor, *The Proverb* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1931).

²A good example of the errors of putting application before interpretation is Proverbs 29:18, "Where there is no vision the people perish" (KJV). How this verse has been misused for "good causes"! Fortunately, most modern versions (NIV, TEV, LB, RSV) have changed this incorrect understanding.

³James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 266-67.

⁴David Keller, "Child Discipline: A Scriptural View," *The King's Business*, (December 1970) 49, and J. A. Walter, *Need: the New Religion* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1986).

⁵BDB (335) and KB (320) take יָנַח as denominative from the noun יָנַח (palate, gums, roof of the mouth). Cf. Gleason Archer, R. L. Harris, B. K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 301.

⁶Both BDB (335) and KB (315) link it to an Arabic cognate ḥanaka referring to the rubbing of the palate (gums = hanakun) of a child with oil and dates before he begins to suck, thus making the material more digestible and palatable (cf. also *TDOT*, v. 19f.; Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 6 [Grand Rapids: Wm. B.

Elizabethan root meaning of “bow legged.” Thus, it cannot be assumed that etymology determines current meaning/usage. One should be doubly leery about reading in a *suggested* etymology [רָחַץ (palate) or חָנַקוּן (desire)] when none of the biblical usages has anything to do with such sensual, cuisinal nuances.

Another way of establishing this oral-appetitive meaning for רָחַץ is on the basis of the use of פִּי (mouth) in the idiom “mouth of his way” (פִּי דָרֶכָיו). This was possibly used for literary effect in Proverbs 22:6.⁷ Such an oral meaning fixation seems unlikely, however, in light of the apparent absence of such inferences elsewhere (Exod 34:27; Deut 17:10–11; etc.).

To Train

Most commentators accept, without discussion, the translation of “train up” as the meaning of the word רָחַץ in Proverbs 22:6.⁸ By “train up” is meant the careful nurturing, instructing and disciplining of the child in an attempt to inculcate a wise and moral character. Such training is frequently mentioned in Proverbs (Prov 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13–14; 29:15, 17; cf. Heb 12:5f.). Consequently, this proverb is cited in support of a plethora of educational and developmental child-rearing philosophies, paradigms and programs.

The importance of early child training cannot be over-emphasized, particularly given the destructiveness of the absent/preoccupied-parent

Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973] 87). The nexus with Egyptian Execration text (2000 B.C.), hnk.t, “tribute, offering,” or the Neo-Punic, hnk(?) , “memorial tombstone,” is doubtful, as Dommershausen observes (cf. Albright, “The Predeuteronomic Primeval,” *JBL* [1939] 58).

⁷James Collins, “A Hermeneutical and Exegetical Examination of Proverbs 22:6” (M.Div. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1983) 29.

⁸Toy, *Proverbs* in ICC, 415; McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970) 564; Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs*, in the Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: University Press, 1972) 124; Bridges, *A Commentary on Proverbs* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1846) 402–4; Charles Fritsch, *Proverbs in the Interpreter’s Bible* (NY: Abingdon, 1955) 907; W. G. Plaut, *Book of Proverbs* (NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1961) 227–28; Edgar Jones, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, in the Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM, 1961) 183–84; Julius Greenstone, *Proverbs with Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Pub. Soc. of America, 1950) 234–35; T. T. Perowne, *The Proverbs* (Cambridge: University Press, 1916) 142; and Otto Zöckler, *The Proverbs of Solomon* in Lange’s Commentary (NY: Charles Scribner and Son, 1904) 192. Zöckler illustrates the point with several proverbs (“What little Johnnie does not learn, John learns never” and “Just as the twig is bent the tree’s inclined”). Similarly, modern experiments of Piaget (“The Mental Development of the Child” in *Six Psychological Studies by Piaget*, ed. O. Elkind [New York: Random, 1967]), categories of Erikson (*Childhood and Society* [New York: W. W. Norton] 247–74), and the work of others highlight the importance of early childhood training. Many affirm that 85% of the child’s personality is formed by the

syndrome that plagues American home life. However, until the original meaning of Proverbs 22:6 is explicated, we dare not jump to dynamic, family-focused, modern applications of the verse.

It may be suggested that the discipline/instruction view of *חנך* is confirmed by a lone use in Aramaic concerning training for fasting on the Day of Atonement.⁹ Modern Hebrew uses synonyms like *למד* or English glosses like “education” and “apprentice/pupil”.¹⁰ In modern Hebrew, *חינוך* means “education.”¹¹ One wonders, however, if such later developments are based on an assumed interpretation of this verse, which has therefore affected the consequent use of this verb in modern times.¹² This verb and its noun forms do not occur elsewhere in Scripture with this discipline/instruction meaning. If instruction was the point, why were the more instructional and frequently-used wisdom verbs not employed (*למד*, *מסר*, *שמע*, *ידע* [Hi])? Or why were there not more generic verbs used (*נתחן*, *לקח*) with the usual wisdom nouns attached (e.g., righteousness, wisdom, knowledge, discernment)?

One further tendency should be resisted in developing the semantic components of this word. Every nuance of the word should not be imported into its use in a particular context. Reich, for example, collects several divergent meanings of *חנך* (dedication, discipline [train up], desire) and develops each of them in light of early childhood training. Such a technique is to be avoided as a violation of valid semantic theory.¹³

To Dedicate/Initiate

The four other occurrences of “train” (*חנך*) in the Old Testament are in contexts of dedicating or initiating the use of buildings. This

time he is 6 years of age. Such findings, chaining early childhood to later life, are held to be supported by this biblical proverb (see e.g., Paul Meier, *Christian Child-rearing and Personality Development* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977]).

⁹Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim* (NY: Pardis Publishing House, 1950) 483.

¹⁰Even-Shoshan, Abraham. *המילון העברי* (Jerusalem: Qiryat Sepher) 800, R. Sivan and E. A. Levenston, *The New Bantam-Megiddo Hebrew and English Dictionary* (NY: Schocken, 1977) 91.

¹¹S. C. Reif, “Dedicated to *חנך*,” *VT* 22 (Oct 1972) 501. Cf. Sivan & Levenston, *Megiddo Dictionary*, 118.

¹²This is not ignoring the fact that modern meanings may be helpful in understanding ancient words (vid. James Barr, *Comparative Philology*, 38–75, 223–37; W. Chomsky, *Hebrew: The Eternal Language* [Philadelphia: 1957] 206–30). Yet, it does make this writer a little reticent—fearing an anachronistic, semantic projection back into the text.

¹³William Reich, “Responsibility of Child Training: Proverbs 22:6” (M.Div. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1971) 27, 35–41.

dedication/initiation is usually accompanied by great celebration. Deuteronomy 20:5 talks about the initiation of a new house as the reason for a man's not going off to war. The parallel references in 1 Kings 8:63 and 2 Chronicles 7:5 are both in the context of the celebrations surrounding the dedication of the Solomonic temple. Reif follows Rankin when he observes that in Deuteronomy 20:5 the word should be understood as the "initial use of" rather than a formal dedication. Dedication is the moving of an object from the realm of the profane to the realm of the sacred.¹⁴ In ritual contexts, however, both dedication and initial use aspects are closely linked. Since the practice of dedicating houses is not found in the Old Testament or in the later Jewish religious traditions, the dedication interpretation seems less likely in Deuteronomy 20:5. The idea of "initiating the use of" is more consistent with the context.¹⁵

Reif carefully discerns the cultic use of *חנך* in 1 Kings 8:63 (2 Chr 7:5).¹⁶ Here the cultic setting causes a coalescing of the idea of dedicating the sacred building with the idea of its initial use. While "make holy" (*שׁוֹפֵט*) and "anoint" (*מָשַׁח*) may be more frequently and exclusively used in dedication contexts, they may be sequentially related to the meaning of *חנך* (cf. 1 Kgs 8:63 and 8:64 where the inner court must be *שׁוֹפֵט* before it can be *חנך*). The LXX translation *ἐγκαταίξω*—while etymologically stressing the idea of newness and initial use—has lexical glosses that favor the idea of dedication.¹⁷

This cultic initiation/dedication use is affirmed through the eight uses of the noun form *חֲנֻכָּה* which occur exclusively in cult object dedication celebrations (Num 7:10, 11, 84, 88; 2 Chr 7:9; Neh 12:27; Ps 30:1[title]). Again in Numbers 7, Reif carefully distinguishes that the "anointing" (*מָשַׁח*) and "consecrating/dedicating" (*שׁוֹפֵט*) come before the "initial use" (*חנך*) of the Mosaic altar (cf. Num 7:1, 10–11, 84, 88).¹⁸ Similarly, Psalm 30:1 is a song that celebrates the initial use of the temple rather than focusing on the dedication of the structure itself. It is interesting that the word for the feast of Hanukkah is derived from the same root and focuses on the Maccabean celebration of the initial use/rededication of the second temple after its being profaned by Antiochus Epiphanes.

¹⁴Reif, "Dedicated to *חנך*" 495–501; O. S. Rankin, *The Origins of the Festival of Hanukkah: The Jewish New-Age Festival* (Edinburgh, 1930) 27–45, and Reif, "The Festival of Hanukkah," in *The Labyrinth*, ed. S. H. Hooke (London, 1935) 159–209. Also Rashi (M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann, *Pentateuch . . . with Rashi's Commentary translated into English and Annotated* [London, 1929]; *Genesis*, 57; *Sefer HaShorashim* [Berlin, 1847] 111).

¹⁵*TDOT*, vol. 5, 20.

¹⁶Reif, "Dedicated to *חנך*", 497.

¹⁷BAGD, 214; LSJ, 469. Cf. Latin "dedicare."

¹⁸Reif, "Dedicated to *חנך*", 497ff.

The same basic noun form is used four times in biblical Aramaic to describe the initial use/dedication of the second temple (Ezra 6:16–17) and of Nebuchadnezzar's 90 foot image of gold (Dan 3:2–3). Jastrow also provides examples of the use of this word by later Jewish sources to describe the dedication of an altar.¹⁹

In summary, the root 𐤒𐤍𐤏 is used as a verb four times other than in Proverbs 22:6. All four are in the context of the celebration of the initiation or dedication of a building (temple). The eight noun uses all have reference to the cultic initiation of material objects (altar/temple/wall). The four uses in biblical Aramaic parallel this usage exactly (idol/second temple). What is to be made of this data, which clearly does not favor the normal pedagogical reading of Proverbs 22:6 as “train up”?

𐤒𐤍𐤏 Analysis

The relationship between wisdom and the cult has been shown not to be mutually exclusive.²⁰ Nevertheless, importing cultic meaning (“to dedicate”) into a proverbial setting is problematic to those who are sensitive to wisdom as a literary genre. Several commentators have realized this problem yet have attempted to include the idea of dedication in their definition of training.²¹ The vast majority of writers, however, virtually ignore the above data and simply attach the meaning “train up” to the Hebrew term 𐤒𐤍𐤏 with no further comment about the semantic bifurcation.

Barr²² and others²³ have indicated the hazards of carelessly carrying over components of meaning from one context into another. All of the above usages of 𐤒𐤍𐤏 have inanimate objects (altars, houses, temples, walls) as their object. When the word has an animate object, it should not be assumed that the meaning will necessarily be homogeneous. For example, the meaning of the word “runs” will have a different set of semantic components depending on whether it is used

¹⁹Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 483f.

²⁰For an excellent study on the relationship of wisdom and the cult, vid. Leo Perdue, *Wisdom and the Cult* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977) 225–26.

²¹Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1964) 147; Robert Alden, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983) 160; Reich, “Responsibility of Child,” 32–35.

²²Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, (London: Oxford University, 1961) 144–46.

²³Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); John Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1977); Eugene Nida, *Exploring Semantic Structures* (Leiden: Brill, 1975); G. N. Leech, *Semantics* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1974); F. R. Palmer, *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981); and John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 90–100.

for something animate or inanimate: “the boy runs” or “the faucet runs”. The question becomes: what does הָנִיחַ mean when applied to people? Jastrow provides several examples in postbiblical Aramaic where the term is used of the high priest, who is inaugurated, and Isaac, who was initiated (הָנִיחַ) into the covenant on the eighth day.²⁴ In Genesis 14:14 there is a very important use of הָנִיחַ where Abraham rescues Lot by sending out his 318 “trained” (הָנִיחַיִּי) men. It would be a mistake to think of these men as novices. Rather they seem to be sent out as men who were strong, experienced and already initiated into military affairs. It is interesting that the Arabic root proposed under “desire” also may be read “make experienced,” which fits well the sense here.²⁵

Similarly, in the Taanach letters (Akkadian documents dating from just before the Amarna age [15th century BC]), Albright has found a complaint from Amenophis of Egypt that Rewassa of Taanach, in the context of mustering troops for war, had not sent his “retainers” (ḥa-na-ku-u-ka) to greet Amenophis. Thus both in Genesis and in the Akkadian Taanach letters the root הָנִיחַ , when applied to people, refers to one who is initiated and experienced, having duties commensurate with his status as a military cadet who has completed his training. What makes this example even more inviting is that later in the Genesis 14 passage these same military cadets (retainers/squires) are called נְעָרִים (14:24).²⁶ The connection of הָנִיחַ with נְעָרִים (young men) is significant because these are the same word roots used in Proverbs 22:6 which are usually translated “train up” and “child”.

Thus, while the term later acquired the meaning “to train” in a didactic sense (similar to לְמַד), it is better to see this word as having specific reference to the inauguration process with the bestowal of status and responsibility as a consequence of having completed an initiation process. In short, the word הָנִיחַ focuses not so much on the process of training as on the resultant *responsibility* and *status* of the one initiated. This meaning of הָנִיחַ in Proverbs 22:6 moves away from a strictly parental admonition for providing the child with good instruction. הָנִיחַ will be returned to in order to show how this new initiation interpretation fits into Proverbs 22:6, after discussing the term translated “child” (נֶעֱר).

²⁴Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 483f.

²⁵*TDOT*, 20; BDB, 335; and Collins, 23.

²⁶Albright, “A Prince of Taanach in the Fifteenth Century B.C.,” *BASOR* 94 (April 1944) 24–25. Cf. *CAD*, H 6:76. Note also that Montgomery, in working on the name Enoch (ḥanok), concludes that if it comes from the same root (Gen 5:24), it means “initiated” as one who walked with God (“Some Hebrew Etymologies,” *JQR* 25 [1934–35] 261). Similarly, Albright calls him “retainer (of God)” (Albright, “Predeuteronomic,” 96).

נָעַר: CHILD OR CADET?

The second lexical problem that the interpreter faces in Proverbs 22:6 is how to render the term נָעַר. Who was this נָעַר that was to be initiated with celebration, status and responsibility? In this verse נָעַר is generally translated “child” (KJV, NIV, NASB, RSV, TEV, NEB, et al.) or “boy” (NAB). MacDonald, in a study based on an analysis of hundreds of Ugaritic and Hebrew usages, has demonstrated that the age-focused idea of “child” is insufficient for understanding who the נָעַר was.²⁷

Status

Looking at the contexts in which the word נָעַר is employed, three things immediately present themselves. First, the age span is so diverse that age cannot be the primary focus of the word. It is used of infancy: for a child yet unborn (Judg 13:5–12); one just born (1 Sam 4:21); an infant still unweaned (1 Sam 1:22); or a three month old baby (Exod 2:6). However, Joseph at 17—already a man in that culture—is also called a נָעַר (Gen 37:2). When he is 30 years old—surely beyond childhood—he is still called a נָעַר (Gen 41:12, 46). Thus, MacDonald is correct when he states that the renderings “child, lad, young man, and servant” are “inadequate and produce a totally false impression of the person involved.”²⁸ Second, the נָעַר is frequently active in strictly adult activities (war [1 Sam 17:33, 42; Judg 6:12, 8:20]; cultic priestly functions [Judg 18:3–6, 20]; special spy missions [Josh 6:22]; personal attendance on a patriarch, prophet, priest, king or son of a king [Gen 18:7; 2 Kgs 5:1–27; 1 Sam 1:22, 24–25; 2 Sam 9:9; 2 Sam 13:17]; or supervision of the whole Solomonic labor force [1 Kgs 11:28]). The term נָעַר is often applied to one who is designated as an אִישׁ (man) (2 Sam 1:5, 10, 13). While he may be a young male, the point is not his age but his societal status and resulting responsibility. Third, there are numerous terms that focus on the age of a young male when age is the point (עָלָם, בֶּן, יָלֵד), עוֹלָל, יוֹנֵק, עוֹלָל (טף).²⁹ It is not merely with these terms that נָעַר finds its semantic field. Rather, it is equally at home with terms like עֶבֶד (servant) or זָקֵן (elder).

An upper-class role and societal status are consistently ascribed to the נָעַר. MacDonald reports that in the historical books there are no

²⁷John McDonald, “The Status and Role of the Na’ar in Israelite Society,” *JNES* 35.3 (1976) 147–70. This article has been summarized briefly also as “The ‘Naar’ in Israelite Society,” *Bible and Spade* (Winter 1977) 16–22. The results of this detailed and conclusive study have not yet been utilized for interpretive purposes.

²⁸McDonald, “The Status and Role of the Na’ar in Israelite Society,” 147.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 150.

examples of a נַעַר of lowly birth.³⁰ Thus, whether the נַעַר is just an infant (like Moses [Exod 2:6], Samuel [1 Sam 1:22, 24–25], or Samson [Judg 13:5]) or an adolescent (like Jacob/Esau [Gen 25:27], Joseph [Gen 37:2], or Solomon [1 Kgs 3:7]), high status is the point—not merely age. Similarly, the feminine נַעֲרָה also means a high-born young female, as can be seen by its usage in reference to Rebekah (Gen 24:16), Dinah (Gen 34:3), Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2:5), and Queen Esther (Esth 2:4).

Personal Attendant

MacDonald also develops two realms in which the status of the נַעַר may be seen: (1) in the domestic realm; and (2) in military contexts.³¹ The נַעַר was frequently a special personal attendant of a person of status. Thus not only was Abraham's נַעַר called on to prepare the special meal for the three heavenly visitors (Gen 18:7–8), but later Abraham's trusted נַעֲרִים accompanied him to mount Moriah for the sacrificing of Isaac (Gen 22:3). Similarly, Joseph was a נַעַר over Potiphar's household and later came, as a נַעַר, into unique headship over Pharaoh's kingdom (Gen 41:12). Joshua, as the personal attendant of Moses, was called a נַעַר (Exod 33:11). When Saul was searching for his father's donkeys he was accompanied by, and listened to the advice of, his נַעַר (1 Sam 9:22; cf. also 1 Kgs 11:20–28; 18:41–44; 19:3; Judg 17:7, 10; 1 Sam 2:17; Ruth 2:5, 21). The point of the above list is to demonstrate that the role of a נַעַר was a personal attendant of a person of status. MacDonald distinguishes between the upwardly mobile status of the נַעַר and the more menial עֶבֶד (servant); the נַעַר could be put in charge over the עֶבְדִים.

Military Cadet

It is significant how frequently the נַעַר is found in military contexts. He is one step above the regular troops, but not yet a mighty warrior such as Joab or Abner. When Joshua had to send out spies—hand-picked men to run reconnaissance on Jericho—he selected two skilled נַעֲרִים (Josh 6:22). Such an important mission would not have been left in the hands of novices. Gideon, the fearful “mighty man of valor” (Judg 6:12) is told to take his trusted נַעַר and go down to scout out the Midianite camp (Judg 7:10–11). Thus the seasoned warrior, Gideon, is accompanied by a squire, who, judging from the importance of the mission, is extremely skillful and trustworthy. Jonathan, climbing the cliffs of Wadi Suwenit, took a trusted נַעַר to face the formidable Philistine host. He and his armor-bearer

³⁰Ibid., 149.

³¹Ibid., 151, 156.

fought and slew 20 men (1 Sam 14:14). It should be clear that the armor-bearer was himself a warrior, though of inferior status to Jonathan. David, as he faced Goliath, was also designated as a נָעָר—hence the impropriety of his fighting the Philistine champion from Gath (1 Sam 17:31ff.).

Several points may be derived from the above data. First, it is clear from the military contexts that inexperienced children are not meant. Rather the word designates soldiers with status above the regular troops, yet clearly and sharply distinguished from the heroic warriors like Goliath, Joab, and Abner. The status of the נָעָר is also seen in his personal attendance on a person of status. The word is also used to describe sons of people of status. This usage is particularly important in Proverbs, which is addressed to the royal sons. Status, not age per se, was the focus of נָעָר. While such clear societal structuring is somewhat foreign to the more egalitarian American culture, we dare not ignore it. Class distinctions were clearly marked not only in Israel, but also, as MacDonald and Rainey have shown, at Ugarit, where the only ancient cognate for the term נָעָר is a term of status used for guild members serving in the domestic sphere and as superior military figures.³² Again, the focus is on status, not age. Thus when the Messianic king is called a נָעָר, His status and function are being highlighted (Isa 7:14–16).

נָעָר in Proverbs

How does understanding of the role of the נָעָר in Israelite society affect Proverbs 22:6? Due to various archaeological finds of the last 100 years, it is possible to verify the presence of wisdom literature in all of the major cultures of the ancient Near East (Sumer, Mesopotamia, Ugarit, Egypt). In each of these cultures, wisdom literature was associated with, written for, and promulgated by the king³³ and his administrators—particularly the scribes.³⁴ The situation in Israel

³²Ibid., 150. A. F. Rainey, "The Military Personnel of Ugarit," *JNES* 24 (1965) 17–27. Also vid. the Merneptah Inscription and a fourth century A.D. Samaritan Chronicle that clearly distinguishes between regular soldiers and the "na'ar" (MacDonald, 152).

³³Some helpful treatments of this topic are: Malchow, "The Roots of Israel's Wisdom in Sacral Kingship"; Leonidas Kalugila, *The Wise King*; Norman W. Porteous, "Royal Wisdom," *VTSup* 3 (1969) 247–61; and Humphreys, "The Motif of the Wise Courtier in the Old Testament" (Ph.D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1970). Also vid. Humphrey's article "The Motif of the Wise Courtier in the Book of Proverbs," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978) 177–90.

³⁴A. Leo Oppenheim, "A Note on the Scribes in Mesopotamia," *Assyriological Studies* 16 (1965) 253–56; and R. J. Williams, "Scribal Training in Ancient Egypt," *JAOS* 92 (1972) 214–21; Benno Landsberger, "Scribal Concepts of Education," in *City*

was the same, for king Solomon (1 Kgs 4:31–32; Prov 1:1; 10:1) and king Hezekiah (Prov 25:1) are explicitly associated with the Israelite wisdom tradition. In this royal setting, terms of status, such as נַעַר, are to be expected. The proverbs helped prepare young squires for capable service at the head of the Israelite societal structure. Thus the suggestion that נַעַר was a term of status, rather than merely of youthfulness, fits well with the original setting of proverbial wisdom literature not only in Israel, but also throughout the ancient Near East.

More to the point, however, is how the term נַעַר is actually used in Proverbs and whether its usage there is consistent with how it is used in other literary genres. It is used seven times in Proverbs (1:4; 7:7; 20:11; 22:6, 15; 23:13; 29:15). Proverbs 1:4–5 announces that it is to the נַעַר and to the simple, wise, and discerning that the book of Proverbs is addressed. Clearly in this context there is no hint that age is the key issue; rather, the נַעַר and simple are grouped together (as are the wise and discerning) *according to their relationship to wisdom*. It is obvious from the message of Proverbs 1–9 (especially chs. 5 and 7) that the נַעַר was not a child. The very content of the proverbial material (sexual advice [Prov 5:1–6, 15–21; 31:10–31]; economic counsel [10:5; 11:1]; political instruction [25:6–7; 29:12]; social graces [23:2]; and military advice [24:6]) indicates that the נַעַר was a late adolescent or young adult. In Proverbs 1:4, the issue of the status is not in the foreground, but his need for wisdom. In Proverbs 7:7 the פְּתָאִים (simple) and the נַעַר are again paralleled, with the נַעַר described as one lacking judgment. Proverbs 20:11 tells the נַעַר that his behavior will be noticed and that it will reveal his heart. Proverbs 22:15 speaks of applying the rod of discipline to the נַעַר to drive out folly. The point is that in spite of his naive bent for folly, he can be molded and instructed. Finally, Proverbs 29:15 says that a נַעַר left to himself will disgrace his mother.

Before concluding this analysis of נַעַר, it is worth noting that the נַעַר in 22:6a is paralleled via grammatical transformation (noun/verb) with growing old. Although MacDonald argues that when the נַעַר and זָקֵן (elder) are paralleled they are both terms of societal status, his case is disrupted by his own examples (Ps 37:25 [cf. also Deut 28:50];

Invincible: A Symposium on Urbanization and Cultural Development in the Ancient Near East, ed. C. Kraeling and R. M. Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960) 123–27; A. F. Rainey “The Scribe at Ugarit,” *Israel Academy of Science and Humanities Proceedings* 3 (1969) 126–46; J. H. Johnson, “Avoid Hard Work, Taxes, and Bosses: Be a Scribe!” Paper, Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, n.d.; Åke W. Sjöberg, “In Praise of the Scribal Art,” *JCS* 14.2 (1972) 126–31; and Barry Halvorsen, “Scribes and Scribal Schools in the Ancient Near East: A Historical Survey” (Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1981).

148:11–13; Jer 6:11). While status difference between the נַעַר (squire) and the זָקֵן (elder) may be the point in some cases, it seems that the age component is sometimes more prominent than he is wont to accept. Furthermore, because of the verbal nature of זָקֵן in Proverbs 26:6b, the aging process, rather than rank, seems to be in view.

It should be clear that this verse should not be employed as biblical support for early childhood training, since the proverbial נַעַר was surely an adolescent/young adult. He is a royal squire who is in the process of being apprenticed in wisdom for taking on royal responsibilities consistent with his status as a נַעַר.

“ACCORDING TO HIS WAY”

The Moral View

The third semantic structure (עַל-פִּי דְרָכּוֹ) must be addressed before bringing the assessment of Proverbs 22:6a to a conclusion. There are four views that have been suggested for understanding the meaning of “his way” (דְרָכּוֹ). McKane holds what can be called the narrow “Moral View”.³⁵ He maintains that in wisdom there is one right way, the way of life, and it is to this way that the young man is directed. It is this way upon which he should go. The juxtaposing of דְרָכּוֹ with a moral qualifier, whether positive—way of חַיִּים (life) [6:23]; בִּינָה (understanding) [9:6]; טוֹב (good) [2:20]; צְדָקָה (righteousness) [16:31]—or negative—way of רָע (evil) [2:12]; רָשָׁעִים (wicked) [4:19]—is quite common in Proverbs, as McKane observes. However, in these cases דְרָכּוֹ is explicitly accompanied by a character qualifier. A qualifier is given in Proverbs 22:6, but it is not a moralistic one. A similar view, although broader in understanding, is the view held by many that דְרָכּוֹ refers to the broad parental shaping of the child in the דְרָכּוֹ—meaning the general direction of righteousness, wisdom, and life—upon which that child should travel as he grows older.³⁶ Again the absence of moral or wisdom qualifiers (wise, righteous, upright, foolish, wicked, etc.) leaves this approach without decisive support.

The Vocational View

This view suggests that the training and the דְרָכּוֹ being described are vocationally oriented.³⁷ However, דְרָכּוֹ is not usually found in a vocational setting. Indeed the modern anxiety over vocational selec-

³⁵McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, 564; cf. also Deane, et al., *Proverbs The Pulpit Commentary*, (Chicago: Wilcox and Follet, n.d.) 422; Collins, “A Hermeneutical and Exegetical Examination of Proverbs 22:6,” 30–32; and Alden, 160.

³⁶Zockler, *The Proverbs of Solomon*, 192.

³⁷Deane, et al., *Proverbs* 422; and Jones, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 183f.

tion and training was not of great concern in the ancient Near East, in that the son often was trained in the same craft as the father.³⁸ Furthermore, vocational selection is not really an issue in Proverbs. Rather, diligence, righteousness, uprightness, and shrewdness are encouraged regardless of vocation.

The Personal Aptitude View

Many recent commentators have opted for the personal aptitude view.³⁹ Such an interpretation wisely advises that the parent must be keenly aware of the child's developing capacities, interests, and inclinations and must tailor the training process to enhance his unique abilities. Toy and Oesterley suggest that there is more of an element of fate or destiny. For them, the child should be trained according to the manner of life for which he is destined.⁴⁰ Delitzsch is correct in observing that "the way of the Egyptians" is the manner of acting which was characteristic of the Egyptians (Isa 10:24). The "way of the eagle" (Prov 30:19) is the manner of movement characteristic to the eagle. But the conclusion drawn from that data is incorrect because נַעַר is read as "child". It is concluded that "his way" means the unique way for *that child*.⁴¹ A suggestion more consistent with the term נַעַר will be offered below. Delitzsch is correct, however, in using נַעַר to specify more clearly what is meant by דַרְךוֹ.

The Personal Demands View

A small minority of writers have taken "according to his way" in an ironic sense. They suggest that the verse is saying that if you rear a child by acquiescing to his desires and demands, when he is old you will never break him of it. Thus the child, left to himself, will become irretrievably recalcitrant—spoiled, continually demanding his own way.⁴² But such a giving up on the נַעַר is opposed to the optimistic outlook that Proverbs has on the teachability of the נַעַר (Prov 1:4). To the ruggedly individualistic and developmentally sensitive modern mind,⁴³ the personal aptitude and personal demands views surely are

³⁸Collins, "A Hermeneutical and Exegetical Examination of Proverbs 22:6," 31.

³⁹Kidner, *Proverbs*, 147; Delitzsch, *Commentary*, 86; Oesterley, *The Book of Proverbs* (London: Methuen) 185; and Toy, *Proverbs*, 415–16. McKane also mentions Ringgren as holding this view (*Proverbs: A New Approach*, 564), as well as Perowne, (*The Proverbs*, 142). Much earlier it was held by the Jewish writer Saadia (Plaut, *Book of Proverbs*, 228).

⁴⁰Oesterley, *The Book of Proverbs with Introduction and Notes*, 185; and Toy, *Proverbs*, 415–16.

⁴¹Delitzsch, *Commentary*, 86f.

⁴²Ralbag as recorded in Greenstone, *Proverbs with Commentary*, 234.

⁴³E. H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (NY: Norton, 1963) 247–77.

attractive. However, they do not reflect the ancient proverbial *weltanschauung*.

The Status View

Delitzsch is correct that the meaning of “the way” must be determined by the noun that is the antecedent of the 3ms suffix (his). If נֶעָר is understood as a high-born squire, then it may be suggested that “according to his way” means according to the office that he will occupy. He is to be “broken-in” (תִּנְנֶה) as a נֶעָר. Thus, “his way” should be the way befitting the dignity of a נֶעָר. “His way” should also reflect an awareness of his developmental limitations and need for instruction. This solution fits the Proverbial ethos and is consistent with the above-stated view of who the נֶעָר was in the structure of Israelite society.

A Standard of Comparison

The initial part of the prepositional phrase, “according to his way,” should be read “according to the measure of his way”.⁴⁴ It is used quite frequently with reference to the measure or standard of the words of Pharaoh (Gen 45:21), Yahweh (Exod 17:1; Num 3:16, 39), Moses (Exod 38:21), and Pharaoh Necho (2 Kgs 23:35). In a more abstract sense, it is used when one is measured against a standard, whether it be words (Exod 34:27), what the vower is able to pay (Lev 27:8), or the Law (Dt 17:11). Thus it fits very well with initiating a נֶעָר in accordance with the standard of who he is and what he is to become as a נֶעָר.

CONCLUSION

Options

A graph of the options presented in this paper provides a three-dimensional perspective on the choices. The more probable choices are given higher positions on the axes (see Table 1).

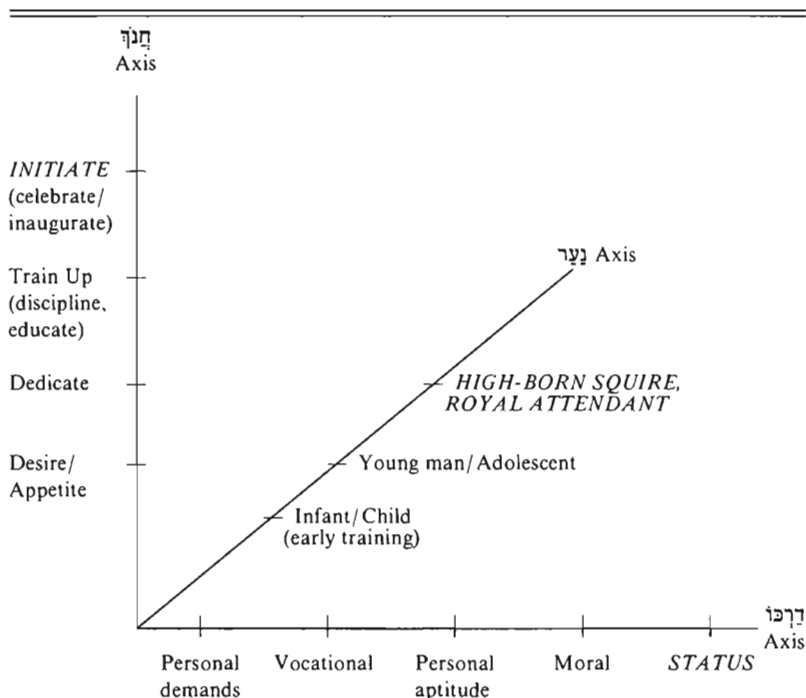
What was the original intent of the verse? Several negative features must set the stage. Proverbs 22:6 is not a promise; it is a proverb and as such it does not describe truth comprehensively. Rather, it gives a single component of truth that must be fit together with other elements of truth in order to approximate the more comprehensive, confused patterns of real life. Second, this verse should not be seen as a paradigm for a comprehensive parental or educa-

⁴⁴BDB, 805; and Collins “A Hermeneutical and Exegetical Examination of Proverbs 22:6,” 33f.

TABLE 1

Proverbs 22:6a

(In order of increasing possibilities)



tional process of instruction into which a particular theory of instruction or child rearing may be read. Third, this verse should not be employed as direct biblical support for early childhood training since the proverbial *נָעַר* was not an infant. Fourth, the phrase “according to his way” should not be understood as addressing developmental or personal aptitude issues, although obviously in child-rearing such parental sensitivities are crucial.

Suggested Interpretation

It is apparent that the usual translation of “child” for *נָעַר* is inadequate. The primary focus of *נָעַר* was his high-born status as a squire. In Proverbs the *נָעַר* is a late adolescent/young adult. Furthermore, the word usually translated “train up” (*תָּנַךְ*) was shown to be used almost universally with the dedication/initiation of temples, houses, altars, or walls. Thus to *תָּנַךְ* a young squire would be to recognize his status as a *נָעַר* and initiate him into his official

capacities/responsibilities with the respect and excitement fitting his status. "According to his way" meant according to the standard and status of what would be demanded of the נָעַר in that culture. Thus the squire's status is to be recognized and his experience, training, and subsequent responsibilities are to reflect that high stature. Finally, this interpretation fits well in the context (Prov 22:1-9) which talks about societal relationships and responsibilities, particularly of the wealthy.⁴⁵

What are the advantages of this interpretation? First, it makes sense of several difficult lexical problems that have formerly been ignored. Second, it fits the ethos of the Proverbial and wisdom materials. Third, it fits the words נָעַר, הָנֵךְ, and דָּרָךְ into a coherent whole.

Dynamic Modern Potentialities

Does the above interpretation of original intent destroy all modern application? The child-rearing interpretation has been so convenient and potent in addressing a major concern of many parents. Can this verse, with this proposed interpretation, provide for our world the dynamic interpersonal power that it must have originally evoked? First, the נָעַר was the one being initiated and being given the recognition of the status which his title bestowed on him. Does this not teach that in initiating an adolescent into a position, the young person should be given the respect and dignity due the title under which he is being trained? If given that type of recognition, he will willingly continue his services when he gets older because he has gained in that position the dignity, respect and responsibility which provide him a healthy level of satisfaction.

This idea of initiating someone with an appropriate level of dignity, respect and responsibility also fits well in a familial setting. The late adolescent (נָעַר) should be treated with dignity and respect in view of creation (Gen 2) and redemption (Rev 20, etc.). Thus he should be given experience, training, status, and responsibilities correspondent to his role in the kingdom of God. An adolescent should be initiated into the adult world with celebrations. His status as a redeemed image bearer should demand parental involvement in terms of opening horizons, patient instruction, and loving discipline. It is his dominion, destiny and status that the parent must keep in mind. The parent must not violate the adolescent's personhood by authoritarian domination, permissive allowance of immaturity, or overprotection from the consequences of his actions.

⁴⁵Roland Murphy cogently shows how Prov 22:1-9 centers around the theme of riches. "Proverbs 22:1-9," *Int* 41:4 (1987) 398-402.

This verse also teaches that when someone engages in an activity for the first time, a celebration of the event would encourage him in the correct path (e.g., Jewish Bar-Mitzvah celebrations). Thus, a word or deed of encouragement (recognition and celebration) that bestows respect and responsibility commensurate with status is one of the most powerful aspects of parental involvement in the life of an adolescent. It is also effective for employer/employee relationships.⁴⁶

These initial attempts at dynamically understanding this verse in light of modern relational structures suggest that a reinterpretation of a verse in its original setting need not eliminate dynamic applications. Both careful interpretation and application are critical if God's word is to be unleashed in a world that is in desperate need of a word of wisdom from the Sovereign of the Universe.

⁴⁶Rudolf Dreikurs, *Children: The Challenge* (New York: Hawthorn/Dutton, 1964), 36-56. Larry Crabb and Dan Allender, *Encouragement: The Key to Caring* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).