

Shayla: Proverbs 22:6 says “Teach a youth about the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” Yet we often see the children of godly parents go astray. Could you explain this?

Meforshim:

In the Hebrew, this verse reads “Ch’anak na’ar derek peh zaquen cuwr” and literally reads “Dedicate a child to a way of mouth, elder not depart”. Obviously, a fundamental misunderstanding could very easily take place as this verse is translated from a Middle Eastern Hebrew culture into an American English mindset.

If we look carefully at the word “ch’anak” (Strong’s #2596), we determine very quickly that “to teach” is not its primary usage. This verb is primarily used in the sense of “to dedicate” and is the source of the term Hanukkah, which is the feast celebrating the rededication of the temple by the Maccabees in 165 BC.¹ Elsewhere in the Bible, it is used of the dedication of a house,² and the dedication of the original Solomonic Temple.³

“Na’ar” (Strong’s #5288) is pretty straightforward. It is mainly used to indicate a boy. It can indicate everything from a new born child⁴ all the way up to a person of about twenty⁵, which seems to be the generally accepted age of accountability in the Old Covenant.

“Derek peh” is an odd phrase. I found this particular association of words a total of nine times in the Old Covenant, including this one found in Proverbs 22:6. In the case of “peh” (Strong’s #6310), it means commandment, speech, word, sayings. In the case of “derek” (Strong’s #1870), it always means “the way”. This makes sense when we take into consideration Jesus’ explanation that “**the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart.**”⁶ He goes further by teaching that “on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak.” By our words we will be acquitted, and by our words we will be condemned.⁷ So “derek peh” would seem to indicate “a way of life or habitual thought pattern indicated or revealed by one’s speech”.

“Zaquen” (Strong’s #2204) clearly means “to be old, to become old, or to grow old.” It does not have the negative connotation that English holds because it is used for vigorous old age.⁸ Its related term “zaquenim” (Strong’s #2205) is used of the wise elders that govern, teach or rule.

Finally, the troublesome “cuwr” (Strong’s #5493) means “to turn aside, to go away, to depart e.g from a way.” However, here’s the interesting part – to which word does “cuwr” point? We find parallel sentence structures in many other passages which give us the clue. In Genesis 40:10, it was the scepter that would not leave Judah. In Exodus 8:11, it was the frogs that would depart from Egypt. In Exodus 8:20, the flies would depart from Pharaoh. In Leviticus 13:58, the plague departed from the children of Israel. In Numbers 12:10, the cloud departed from the tabernacle. We could go on with quite a few other passages⁹ but for the sake of space, we won’t.

Apparently, the intent of the passage may thus be taken as “If you dedicate your child to a way of life or habitual thought pattern, as he ages it (the thought pattern) will never leave him.” This fits nicely with the idea described elsewhere that even a murderer goes to his grave with his conscience bothering him.¹⁰

¹ I Macc. 4:52 ff.

² Deuteronomy 20:5

³ 1 Kings 8:63; 2 Chronicles 7:5

⁴ Exodus 2:6; Judges 13:5, 7; 1 Samuel 4:21

⁵ Genesis 34:19; 41:12 cp 37:2 and 41:2; 1 Kings 3:7; Jeremiah 1:6-7

⁶ Matthew 12:34; Luke 6:45

⁷ Matthew 12:36-37

⁸ Genesis 18:12-13; 19:31; 24:1; 27:1; 1 Samuel 2:22

⁹ Numbers 14:9; 16:26; Deuteronomy 4:9; Judges 16:20; 1 Samuel 15:6; 16:14, 23:18:12; 28:15-16; 2 Samuel 7:15; 12:10; 22:23; 2 Kings 3:3; 10:29, 31; 13:2, 6; 13:11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 28; 17:22; 18:6; 2 Chronicles 8:15; 20:32; 34:33; 35:15; Nehemiah 9:19; Job 15:30; 21:14; 37:27; 101:4; 119:102, 115; 139:19; Proverbs 3:7; 5:7 etc.

¹⁰ Proverbs 28:17

To say that we may imprint our children in such a manner that they will be unable to choose differently is hubris. It fails to take into account human free will. However, we may be sure that our influence on our children will remain with them for the rest of their lives. This can either be a tremendous relief for those who raised their children in a godly manner or a tremendous burden for those who failed to raise their children properly.

Nevertheless, free will remains. Those whose parents were godly may stubbornly refuse the Way and take the broad path that leads to destruction. Those whose parents were wicked can yet rise above their upbringing and become godly people. If there is one thing of which I am confident, it is that the Bible teaches personal responsibility.

- 2 Kings 14:6 HCSB However, he did not put the children of the murderers to death, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses where the LORD commanded, "Fathers must not be put to death because of children, and children must not be put to death because of fathers; instead, each one will be put to death for his own sin."
- Jeremiah 31:29-30 HCSB "In those days, it will never again be said: The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. 30 Rather, each will die for his own wrongdoing. Anyone who eats sour grapes--his own teeth will be set on edge.
- Ezekiel 18:2-20 HCSB "What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel: The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? 3 As I live"--this is the declaration of the Lord GOD--"you will no longer use this proverb in Israel. 4 Look, every life belongs to Me. The life of the father is like the life of the son--both belong to Me. The person who sins is the one who will die. 5 "Now suppose a man is righteous and does what is just and right: 6 He does not eat at the mountain shrines or raise his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife or come near a woman during her menstrual impurity. 7 He doesn't oppress anyone but returns his collateral to the debtor. He does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing. 8 He doesn't lend at interest or for profit but keeps his hand from wrongdoing and carries out true justice between men. 9 He follows My statutes and keeps My ordinances, acting faithfully. Such a person is righteous; he will certainly live." This is the declaration of the Lord GOD. 10 "Now suppose the man has a violent son, who sheds blood and does any of these things, 11 though the father has done none of them. Indeed, when the son eats at the mountain shrines and defiles his neighbor's wife, 12 and when he oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, and does not return collateral, and when he raises his eyes to the idols, commits abominations, 13 and lends at interest or for profit, will he live? He will not live! Since he has committed all these abominations, he will certainly die. His blood will be on him. 14 "Now suppose he has a son who sees all the sins his father has committed, and though he sees them, he does not do likewise. 15 He does not eat at the mountain shrines or raise his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife. 16 He doesn't oppress anyone, hold collateral, or commit robbery. He gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing. 17 He keeps his hand from harming the poor, not taking interest or profit on a loan. He practices My ordinances and follows My statutes. Such a person will not die for his father's iniquity. He will certainly live. 18 "As for his father, he will die for his own iniquity because he practiced fraud, robbed his brother, and did what was wrong among his people. 19 But you may ask: Why doesn't the son suffer punishment for the father's iniquity? Since the son has done what is just and right, carefully observing all My statutes, he will certainly live. 20 The person who sins is the one who will die. A son won't suffer punishment for the father's iniquity, and a father won't suffer punishment for the son's iniquity. The righteousness of the righteous person will be on him, and the wickedness of the wicked person will be on him.