

Children of Obedient Parents Turning out for God—Certainty or Mere Possibility in Proverbs 22:6?¹

Does the Bible teach that godly parents who raise their children as they ought have a Divine promise that their children will be saved and live for Him, or is such only a possibility? If they do what is right, can they be certain that God will save their children and lead them to follow Him, or must they fear that, despite doing everything that they ought to do, their children could end up tormented in fire and brimstone for all eternity, so that it would have been better for them to have never been born (Mark 14:21)? A number of texts of Scripture relate to the question.

The *locus classicus* for the doctrine that parents have a Divine promise that their children will be saved and live for God if they are raised properly is Proverbs 22:6:

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.²

The natural and obvious reading of this passage is that the verse is a promise—if one obeys the command³ to train up a child in the way he should go, in the way of spiritual and ethical righteousness, then when the child is old, he will not depart from that holy way. Proper parenting of children from the earliest youth⁴ into full maturity⁵ involves a blessed promise in this passage—a child properly trained will, as he grows up to adulthood and passes into old

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² חַנֵּךְ לְנַעַר עַל־פִּי דְרָכָו גַּם כִּי־יִזְקֶנּוּ לֹא־יִסּוּר מִמֶּנּוּהָ:
The Targum reads: “Reprove a child at the outset of his way that he might not stray from it when he grows old.” אֹכַח לְטַלְיָא לְקַבִּיל אֹרְחִיהָ דְלֹא כִד נִסְבָּא נִסְטִי מִיְנִיהָ:

³ “Train up” (חַנֵּךְ) is an imperative: “Train [thou] up,” not a future indicative, “If thou shalt train up.”

⁴ The first clause of Proverbs 22:6 specifies that training is “to begin *at the mouth* or entrance of *his way*—at the first opening intelligence. The more early the *training*, the more easy the work, and the more encouraging the results” (Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of the Book of Proverbs* [New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1865], 339). Compare the uses of עַל־פִּי in Genesis 29:2-3, 8, 10; Joshua 10:27; Judges 18:19; 1 Kings 7:31; 2 Kings 4:34; Job 21:5; Psalms 133:2; Isaiah 6:7; 19:7; Jeremiah 1:9; Micah 7:16. Note also the Targum, “at the outset of his way” (לְקַבִּיל אֹרְחִיהָ). Parents who neglect proper child training during their young ones’ earliest years, but then begin to obey Scripture in this area, ought to recognize that God in His grace still is able to work powerfully in their children’s lives. However, Proverbs 22:6 is no longer a certain promise for such parents.

Note the further comments on עַל־פִּי in footnote #7.

⁵ The word “child” (נַעַר) refers to “an age group that extends from infancy (Exod. 2:6; 1 Sam. 1:22, 24; 4:21) to a seventeen-year-old (Gen. 37:2), to a thirty-year-old (Gen. 41:12; cf. 41:46), and so presumably to any age before being reckoned an elder (*zāqēn*; see 17:6; 20:29)” (Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004], 178).

age, continue in the path of righteousness.⁶ The meaning of the verse is accurately rendered in the Authorized Version.⁷ Proverbs 22:6 is exemplified, with very significant linguistic parallels,⁸ in other books of the Bible:

And he walked in all the ways of Asa his father; he turned not aside from it, doing *that which was* right in the eyes of the LORD. (1 Kings 22:43a)⁹

And he did *that which was* right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left. (2 Kings 22:2)

And he walked in the way of Asa his father, and departed not from it, doing *that which was* right in the sight of the LORD. (2 Chronicles 20:32)

And he did *that which was* right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father, and declined *neither* to the right hand, nor to the left. (2 Chronicles 34:2)¹⁰

⁶ Nothing in Proverbs 22:6 breathes the slightest hint that a child that is trained up properly may reject Christ and go into the world, but when he reaches old age he will repent and turn to the Lord and the way of righteousness. The verb rendered “when he is old” in the verse, a Hiphil of יָקַן, means “to grow older” (*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament [HALOT]*, Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, trans. & ed. M.E.J. Richardson). As the child grows older year after year and decade after decade, he will continue in the way of righteousness, not reject it and then repent decades later when he has dishonored God, destroyed his life, filled his parents with shame and grief, and become an old man. Compare the continuity of development in the only other Hiphil of יָקַן in the Old Testament, Job 14:8. Furthermore, the וְ also of the verse emphatically connects the two clauses of the verse and signifies “and also” or “even” (*HALOT*)—that is, the verse means, “Train up a child . . . and even when he is old, he will not depart from it,” indicating that the child continues in the right way until old age, not that he rejects the right way but turns back from sin to righteousness in old age. Compare the other instances of Proverbs 22:6’s וְ וְ in Joshua 22:7; Ruth 2:21; Psalm 23:4; Isaiah 1:15; Lamentations 3:8; Hosea 8:10; 9:16.

⁷ עַל־פִּי means “according to” (cf. Exodus 17:1, יְהוָהּ יְהוָהּ, “according to the commandment of the LORD”). The Hebrew עַל־פִּי דְרָכָו, rendered in KJV margin as “in his way,” means “in the way he should go.” The idea of the text is a moral command—the way of righteousness—not some sort of other training, such as training a child in job skills. This is evident because the verb הִנְחִי, “with לְ to train up Pr 22:6,” (*HALOT*), means, in all the other texts where it is found, “to dedicate” (*ibid.*) or consecrate to Jehovah (Deuteronomy 20:5; 1 Kings 8:63; 2 Chronicles 7:5). The verb is related to the noun הִנְחָה, which is always used of a believer’s dedication or consecration of an object to his God (Numbers 7:10–11, 84, 88; Psalm 30:1; Daniel 3:2–3 (here of an idolator dedicating something to the false god in which he believes); Ezra 6:16–17; Nehemiah 12:27; 2 Chronicles 7:9; cf. הִנְחִי, “Enoch,” the holy man whose name means “dedicated [to God],” Genesis 5:24. Thus, Proverbs 22:6 speaks of a training up that is a consecration to God, not to an ability to learn how to farm or to engage in building construction. That training in “his way” (דְרָכָו) is in “the way that he should go” in the sense of the way of holiness, rather than in some morally neutral way or way of professional skills, is likewise evident from a consideration of the entire verse. Every time the verb “depart” (סָר) found in Proverbs 22:6b appears in Proverbs, it is related to spiritual or ethical departing, never to a morally neutral departing (Proverbs 3:7; 4:24, 27; 5:7; 9:4, 16; 11:22; 13:14, 19; 14:16, 27; 15:24; 16:6, 17; 22:6; 27:22; 28:9). The righteous “depart from evil” (3:7; 13:19; 14:16; 16:6, 17) and “from the snares of death” (13:14; 14:27) and “from hell” (Proverbs 15:24) and “depart not” from righteousness (5:7). Furthermore, every time the verb “depart” controls a clause with the word “way” (דְרָכָו) in Scripture the departure relates to spiritual and ethical matters (Exodus 32:8; Deuteronomy 9:12, 16; 11:28; 31:29; Judges 2:17; Psalm 119:29; Isaiah 30:11; Lamentations 3:11; Malachi 2:8; cf. Job 21:14; 34:27; Proverbs 16:17). Thus, the “way” from which the child that has been trained up and consecrated to Jehovah will not depart is the way of holiness and spiritual righteousness, the way of the faithful people of God.

⁸ Proverbs 22:6; 1 Kings 22:43; 2 Kings 22:2; 2 Chronicles 20:32; 34:2 all contain the verb “depart” (סָר) negated with the same particle (לֹא) connected to the verb with a *maqef*, and the same word “way” (דְרָכָו) as in Proverbs 22:6. The later texts allude to the earlier Proverb written by Solomon.

⁹ Note that the failure of 1 Kings 22:43b is not one of Jehoshaphat’s personal piety, but took place because “as yet the people had not prepared their hearts unto the God of their fathers” (2 Chronicles 20:33).

Thus, Proverbs 22:6 states that a child trained up in holiness will not depart from that righteous way. But is the verse a promise, or only a principle that can—and will—fail at different times? The verse is unquestionably a promise, a certainty guaranteed by the omnipotent and faithful God. Every time “will not depart,” the future tense of the verb in question,¹¹ appears in the Old Testament, and God is making the statement,¹² certainty, not mere possibility, is in view.¹³ Thus, Proverbs 22:6 means exactly what it appears to mean to one who simply takes the verse at face value—a child who is trained up in the way he should go will not depart from that right way.

Other texts in Scripture confirm the fact that parents who train up their children rightly can rejoice in a joyful certainty that their children will be saved and serve God. Proverbs 29:17 states: “Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul.” As Proverbs and the rest of the Bible—not to mention experience—make clear, a wicked and unconverted child does not give rest and delight to godly parents. Proverbs 29:17 teaches, as does Proverbs 22:6, that a child who is properly trained will be saved and serve the Lord. Similarly, Proverbs 23:13-14 declares: “Withhold not correction from the child: for *if* thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.” This passage guarantees that a properly

¹⁰ Compare the positive instances of not departing from righteousness in 2 Kings 18:6; 27:2 and the instances of not departing from evil in 2 Kings 3:3; 10:29, 31; 13:2, 6, 11; 14:24; 15:18, 24, 28; 17:22.

¹¹ Technically, the imperfect form of וַיֵּשֶׁב when the verb is not conveying an imperatival force or some idea other than a simple affirmation about the future and is not connected to a *waw*-conversive, or when in the perfect tense וַיֵּשֶׁב refers to a simple future idea because of the context and the presence of *waw*-conversive.

¹² That is, a text such as Judges 9:29 does not count. Gaal the son of Ebed is not infallibly faithful in his promises—but Jehovah is. Similar instances to Judges 9:29, where a man is making an affirmation about the future, appear in Judges 20:8; Job 15:30; 27:5.

¹³ The forty verses in the category in question are: Genesis 49:10; Exodus 8:11; 23:25; 33:23; Deuteronomy 2:27; 7:4, 15; 31:29; Judges 9:29; 16:17; 1 Samuel 17:46; 2 Samuel 7:15; 12:10; 2 Kings 23:27; Is 3:18; 5:5; 10:27; 11:13; 14:25; 25:8; 31:2; Jeremiah 32:40; Ezekiel 11:18–19; 16:42; 23:25; 26:16; 36:26; Hosea 2:17; Amos 6:7; Zephaniah 3:11; Zechariah 9:7; Job 34:20; Proverbs 22:6; 27:22; Daniel 11:31; 12:11; 1 Chronicles 17:13; 2 Chronicles 30:9; 33:8. Isaiah 18:5 might also fit. None of these texts can be proven to be anything less than a promise, while the overwhelming majority are clearly infallibly certain promises. The burden of proof is on the advocate of the view that Proverbs 22:6 is merely a principle that will fail at times to find a text where his weakened sense of the verb in question unquestionably appears. His position fails to meet that burden of proof. Even if texts where the verb was a principle instead of a promise appeared in the Bible—and there are no clear instances—the person who would deny that Proverbs 22:6 is a promise would need to prove that the “principle” sense is not just found somewhere in the Bible, but is the actual idea in Proverbs 22:6, against the overwhelming majority of instances where the verb conveys an actual promise. This also cannot be done.

It should be noted as well that, while the position that Proverbs 22:6 is a promise is not dependent on the view that there are no statements in Proverbs that are simply principles, not promises, the idea that the inspired proverbs are generally principles which have exceptions, rather than promises, is more easily stated than proven. A text such as Proverbs 3:1-2 could indeed be a promise to a son of Solomon, the theocratic head of the theocratic nation of Israel. The Old Testament dynamic of partial and ultimate fulfillment of promises, so that all the godly will not just live long lives in this present world but will live forever and inherit the eschatological new earth and new heaven in undisturbed peace and prosperity, should also be kept in mind when interpreting Proverbs.

disciplined child will come to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and will not go to hell.¹⁴ Other texts in the book of Proverbs make similar promises.¹⁵ In light of these Divine promises, it is not surprising that neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament record a single unambiguous example of parents who did everything they were supposed to do for their children, yet their children rejected God and refused to walk in holiness.

The fact that the New Testament requires spiritual leaders to have godly children¹⁶ also demonstrates that Proverbs 22:6 and similar texts are promises. The pastor (and every other spiritual leader¹⁷) must be “one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)” (1 Timothy 3:4-5).¹⁸ He must have “faithful children not accused of riot or unruly” (Titus 1:6),¹⁹ because otherwise he is not “blameless” (Titus 1:7; 1 Timothy 3:2).²⁰ The fact that every minister who has children that grow up to be unregenerate and unfaithful²¹ is not qualified for office only makes sense if believers who

¹⁴ It is outside of the scope of this analysis to deal with those who deny that הַיָּסוּד actually does refer, with some frequency, to torment in hell, arguing instead that in Scripture *Sheol* refers only to the grave. It will merely be noted how incredibly inane it would be, if “hell” were merely the grave, to warn: “The wicked shall be turned into hell, *and* all the nations that forget God” (Psalm 9:17), since then Psalm 9:17 could with equal accuracy have stated, “The righteous shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that remember God,” since all the godly people of David’s day went to the grave as did the wicked. It is also beyond credulity to believe that when David penned Psalm 86:13 (“For great *is* thy mercy toward me: and thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell.”) he was not rejoicing that God’s mercy had saved him from torment in hell fire, but he was looking forward to being buried in a shallow grave rather than a deep one.

¹⁵ For example, Proverbs 29:15 guarantees that the rod and reproof will give wisdom, and thus a properly disciplined and trained child will not be a fool, but a wise man, which requires regeneration and a walk with God. Proverbs 22:15 promises that a properly disciplined child will not have foolishness near to him, and so he will not be an ungodly man, the fool of the book of Proverbs. Note also Proverbs 20:7.

¹⁶ 1 Timothy and Titus do not affirm that every pastor must be married and have children—the chief Shepherd was unmarried (1 Peter 5:4). A pastor whose wife and children are martyred in persecution is not instantly disqualified from his office. Rather, the pastoral epistles teach that elders with a family must have a godly household.

¹⁷ If the office of the deacon requires a godly family (1 Timothy 3:12), how much the more must evangelists, church planters at home and abroad, and other ministers, have a godly family to be qualified for office?

¹⁸ τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου καλῶς προϊστάμενον, τέκνα ἔχοντα ἐν ὑποταγῇ μετὰ πάσης σεμνότητος (εἰ δέ τις τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου προστήναι οὐκ οἶδε, πῶς ἐκκλησίας Θεοῦ ἐπιμελήσεται);

¹⁹ τέκνα ἔχων πιστά, μὴ ἐν κατηγορίᾳ ἀσωτίας ἢ ἀνυπότακτα.

²⁰ Note the specific connection of the requirement of faithful children and blamelessness in Titus 1:6-7; the bishop must have faithful children, “for” (γάρ) he must be blameless.

²¹ The requirement that the minister have τέκνα . . . πιστά, “faithful children,” includes the fact that their children must be believers, not unsaved people, but it is not limited to belief—backslidden and unfaithful (yet professedly or allegedly) regenerate children also disqualify the minister, for such are certainly able to be “accused of riot” and are “unruly” (Titus 1:6) and are not in “subjection with all gravity” and well “rule[d]” (1 Timothy 3:4-5). The other references to πιστός in Titus signify “faithful,” not simply “believing” (1:9; 3:8). Note also that in the very large majority of the uses of πιστός by Paul in syntactical constructions similar to that of Titus 1:6, the word means “faithful”; out of 22 uses (1 Corinthians 1:9; 4:2, 17; 10:13; 2 Corinthians 1:18; Colossians 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:24; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 Timothy 1:12, 15; 3:1, 11; 4:9; 6:2; 2 Timothy 2:11, 13; Titus 1:6, 9; 3:8; Hebrews 3:5; 10:23; 11:11), only one possibly means simply “believing” (1 Timothy 6:2), and even this instance could reasonably be viewed as “faithful.” Likewise, either 90% or 100% (depending, again, on 1 Timothy 6:2) of the uses of πιστός in the accusative case, as it is in Titus 1:6, signify

properly raise their children can be certain that they will live for God—while ungodly children are certainly responsible for their own wickedness,²² such a tragic result also evidences a moral failure on the part of their unhappy parents, for the requirement that the bishop have faithful children is as much a moral qualification²³ as are being vigilant, sober, and of good behavior, or not being a striker, greedy, or covetous. The fact that pastors are disqualified if their children go bad, no matter how old those children are,²⁴ also demonstrates that Proverbs 22:6 is a promise that even into old age children who are trained correctly will not depart from the way of righteousness. The New Testament provides

“faithful” (Acts 13:34; 16:15; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Timothy 1:12; 3:11; 6:2; Titus 1:6; Hebrews 3:2; 11:11; 3 John 5). In the very close linguistic parallel to Titus 1:6 in 1 Corinthians 4:17, employing both πιστός and τέκνον, “faithful” is the idea conveyed. The broader use of πιστός in the New Testament supports the truth established by the immediate context of Titus 1:6 that the children of overseers, elders, or pastors must be not only regenerate but also obedient. Furthermore, Scripture teaches that people are to treat those who are rebellious and backslidden, and consequently subject to church discipline, as heathen men and publicans (Matthew 18:15-20), so children who are riotous and unruly are to be treated as unregenerate persons, not as true believers, for at least as long as they remain in their rebellious state. See the study of the *pistis* word group in “‘The just shall live by faith’—A Study of Faith’s Connection with Salvation in All its Justifying, Sanctifying, and Glorifying Fulness,” Thomas D. Ross, elec acc. <http://faithsaves.net/just-faith/>.

²² Ezekiel 18:20; Deuteronomy 24:16, and a plethora of other Biblical texts prove that each individual is responsible before God for his own sin. Samuel’s sons were responsible for making themselves vile, and Samuel was responsible for not restraining them (1 Samuel 3:13; the translation “restrain” for נָחַם in the Authorized Version is correct: “restrain them. Hebrew *kihâ bām*. BDB, KB give ‘rebuke’ as the meaning of *kihâ*. But this cannot be right; Eli did rebuke his sons (2:22–25)” (P. K. McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008] 98). Parents will be held responsible before God for their sins in bad parenting, and children will be responsible for the personal sins they commit in becoming ungodly and rebellious, even though those sins would not have been committed had their parents obeyed Proverbs 22:6 and not failed in their parenting. The fact that parents do not bear the iniquities of their children, but are held accountable for their own sins in raising their children, is completely consistent with the view that God promises a godly seed to parents that raise their children properly. Only improper hermeneutics or illogic would view the two propositions as in conflict.

²³ The clauses τέκνα ἔχων πιστά (“having faithful children,” Titus 1:6) and τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου καλῶς προϊστάμενον, τέκνα ἔχοντα ἐν ὑποταγῇ μετὰ πάσης σεμνότητος (“one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity,” 1 Timothy 3:4) are adjectival, describing the elder or bishop in the same way that simple adjectives such as “blameless” (ἀνέγκλητος) do.

²⁴ The qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not limited to the time that the children are in their parents’ house. The qualification is not limited to “young children,” “infants,” or the like; it simply says that the elder’s “children” must be walking in the way of holiness, without any limitation as to age. As long as the elder is a parent and his children are his children—that is, for the entire course of their lives—so long do the requirements of 1 Timothy 3:4-5 and Titus 1:6 last, even as in the Old Testament Samuel was responsible when his adult, married sons made themselves vile (1 Samuel 3:13). The word employed for “children” in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, τέκνον, is employed in Scripture for those who are descended from their parents, without regard to age, and without a limitation to children still at home (cf. Matthew 23:37; 27:25; Luke 13:34; 19:44; Romans 9:8; Galatians 4:25). It is used in Acts 13:33 for the apostle Paul and for other “men of Israel” (Acts 13:16) for “men and brethren” (Acts 13:26), and even for one who grows up, becomes rich, rules a wealthy household, grows older, and is already dead (Luke 16:25). Furthermore, it is easy to hide the rebellion of children when they are very young and still at home; it is when they are older and their rebellion becomes obvious that parenting failures become public. It is entirely unreasonable to say that as soon as a pastor’s children become rebellious enough to reject his authority, run away from home, and totally give themselves to the world, the requirement of his office to have a godly seed comes to an end—and certainly it is very difficult to argue that a man with such children is “blameless” in his parenting (Titus 1:6-7).

further evidence that Proverbs 22:6 and other Old Testament texts promise that parents who raise their children correctly can be certain that they will have a godly seed.

Proverbs 22:6, other Old Testament passages, and the New Testament, harmoniously teach that parents who raise their children properly can be certain to have a godly family.²⁵ Christian parents should rejoice at the Divine guarantee that they can have saved and holy children, act in faith on such promises, and plead them before God in prayer. They should reject the false doctrine that it is possible for parents to do all that they ought to do and have their children reject Christ and live for the devil. They should also be sober-minded and zealously, passionately determined that they will live lives of faith, love, and holiness before God themselves, since, while their children are certainly moral agents who are personally accountable if they reject Christ, parents with ungodly children do bear the responsibility, in every case, of having failed in their childrearing.

²⁵ The exegetical analysis in this composition is sufficient to demonstrate the truth of the proposition that God has promised that properly trained children will be saved and live for God. Speculation about how such certainty is consistent with the freedom of the will, Divine sovereignty, and other such high and lofty topics may be worth pondering, but they do not determine what Proverbs 22:6 or any other passage of Scripture means. Far less does personal experience or the limited, fallible evaluation of the lives and families of other people determine the proper interpretation of Scripture. Whatever the Bible teaches is true, whether frail and finite men can figure out how to fit it into systems of speculative philosophy or not—and whether or not God’s infallible revealed truth matches the extremely limited and easily mistaken personal observations of mortal creatures has no bearing whatsoever upon proper Biblical interpretation.

One might object that Isaiah 1:2 proves that Proverbs 22:6 is not a promise; God was a perfect Father to Israel, but the nation rebelled. Similarly, Luke 3:38 reads, “Adam, which was *the son* of God” (τοῦ Ἀδάμ, τοῦ Θεοῦ), so Adam was God’s son, but he rebelled. However, neither passage proves Proverbs 22:6 is not a promise. There are various senses in which God is Father. He is eternally Father by nature of His eternal Son; He is the adopted Father of believers. He is Father to the nation of Israel as His adopted national people. One cannot assume that because God acts as Father to a nation, all aspects of literal human parenting are directly applicable or directly transfer, even apart from considerations such as the fact that true spiritual Israel will indeed be faithful and the unconverted Israelites are not reckoned as being God’s true nation or children. God’s relationship to Israel is represented in Scripture with many metaphors, from husband/wife (Jeremiah 31:32), to farmer/vineyard (Isaiah 5), to father/son (Isaiah 1:2), to suzerain/vassal (Deuteronomy), to eagle/eaglet (Deuteronomy 32:11), and so on. In 1 Timothy 3:4-5, the overseer must have a faithful family or he is disqualified, but one would hardly argue that since national Israel is represented as an adulterous harlot at one point (Ezekiel 16:32-35) God has failed as an overseer, and so He is not qualified to oversee the nation and must cede His sovereignty. Likewise, it would be very poor hermeneutics to ignore the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:4-5 and allow an overseer to have a wife who is an adulterous harlot because of the family metaphor in Ezekiel 16. Proverbs 22:6 is a promise to human parents concerning their literal progeny, and the literal interpretation of the passage cannot be set aside because of one of the many metaphors God employs of His relationship with Israel. Similarly, even apart from the fact that Adam was converted and entered the kingdom of God as one of His servants (Genesis 3:15, 20), God’s position as Creator over Adam as His created “son” is clearly categorically distinct from the situation envisaged in Proverbs 22:6. If the fact that God calls Adam His created “son” means that Proverbs 22:6 cannot be a promise to human fathers concerning their literal offspring, one would have to argue also, based on Luke 3:38, that it is *a priori* impossible that God could even possibly make a promise to human fathers that their children would turn out right in this world without contradicting His own nature. Any verse that would seem to be such a promise would have to be re-interpreted because of God’s creative act over the world and the use of the word “son” in Luke. Clearly, Luke 3:38 does not address the same situation as Proverbs 22:6, and the Lukan text does not at all change the natural, grammatical-historical interpretation of Proverbs 22:6 as a promise.

Proverbs 22:6 and Adoption

Do Proverbs 22:6 and the other related texts apply to adopted children raised for God, or only to children raised by parents who conceived them? Scripture does not limit the promise of Proverbs 22:6 or other related texts to children raised by parents who conceived them—adopted children are included in the promise of Proverbs 22:6.

First, the immediate context of the passages in Proverbs supports the inclusion of adopted children in the promise. Proverbs 22:6 simply commands: “Train up a child,”²⁶ with no limitation only to children that one has personally conceived; the text simply refers to “a child.” As adopted children equally have the morally right “way [they] should go,” so they likewise have the promise that when they are old they will not depart from that righteous way. Similarly, Proverbs 23:13-14 does not promise that only one’s biologically conceived child will be saved from hell if he receives proper corporal punishment, but that any such “child” will be saved from damnation. Likewise, Proverbs 22:15 clearly refers to all children. Proverbs 22:15a does not limit foolishness to the heart of biologically conceived children—adopted children also have foolishness in their hearts—and Proverbs 22:15b specifies for adopted children also that the rod of correction will drive their foolishness far from them. The immediate context of Biblical promises concerning childrearing demonstrates that adopted children are included.

Second, the word “child” (*na‘ar*)²⁷ in Proverbs 22:6 is frequently employed in Scripture for a person who is not conceived by those whose “child” he is. The word is used for servants in Abraham’s household who have no biological relationship to the patriarch (Genesis 14:24; 18:7) and for “young men” who were servants in Abraham’s household and who are contrasted with “Isaac his son” (Genesis 22:3).²⁸ The word is also used both for the servants of Abraham and for Isaac in the same verse (Genesis 22:5), used specifically for Isaac (Genesis 22:12), and used specifically for young male servants (Genesis 22:19). Many verses employ the word *na‘ar* for biological children.²⁹ Many others employ it for servants in a household with no biological relationship to the household head,³⁰ and the word is

²⁶ חֲנֹךְ לְנֶעֱר

²⁷ נֶעֱר. Scripture also, of course, frequently employs *ben* (בֶּן) to refer to a *son* or a child. Numbers of passages employ *נֶעֱר* and בֶּן of the same persons (2 Samuel 13:32; 2 Kings 9:1, 4; Job 1:18-19; Hosea 11:1).

²⁸ וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבֹרְתָם בְּבִקְרָה וַיַּחְבֹּשׁ אֶת-חַמְלוּי וַיִּקַּח אֶת-שְׁנֵי נְעָרָיו אִתּוֹ וַיִּצְתַּק בָּנָו

²⁹ Genesis 34:19; 37:2; 43:8; 44:22, 30-32, 33-34; 1 Samuel 1:22, 24, 25, 27, 2:11; 4:21; 16:11; 2 Samuel 12:16; 13:32; 14:21; 18:5, 12, 29, 32; 1 Kings 14:3, 17; 2 Kings 4:29, 30, 31, 32, 35, 38; Job 1:19; 24:5; 29:5.

³⁰ Numbers 22:22; Judges 7:10-11; 9:54; 19:3, 9, 11, 13, 19; Ruth 2:5, 6, 9, 15, 21; 1 Samuel 2:13, 15; 9:3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 22, 27; 10:14; 14:1, 6; 16:18; 20:21, 35-41; 21:2, 4, 5; 25:5, 8, 9, 12, 14, 19, 25, 27; 26:22; 2 Samuel 9:9; 13:17, 28, 29, 34; 16:1, 2; 18:15; 19:17; 1 Kings 11:28; 18:43; 19:3; 2 Kings 4:12, 19, 22, 24, 25; 5:20, 23; 6:15, 17; 8:4; 19:6; Isaiah 37:6; Job 1:15, 16, 17; Esther 2:2; 6:3, 5; Nehemiah 4:16, 22, 23; 5:10, 15, 16; 6:5, 13:19.

employed even for young men in the very broadly defined “household” of members of the military underneath a military commander.³¹ Many passages mix the biological and non-biological uses of *na‘ar* together in close proximity³² because *na‘ar* in Proverbs 22:6, and many other texts, does not contrast children in a household based on their biological relationship (or lack thereof) to the household head but specifies *youth* in contrast to *age*.

Thus, *na‘ar* frequently emphasizes youth and contrasts the child or children from newly born infants³³ on up to yet unmarried young men³⁴ with elders or the old.³⁵ Other Hebrew words sharing the *n‘r* root likewise emphasize youth.³⁶ *Na‘ar* is used in general for the “young” in contrast to the “old” where the “young” are not limited to children of their older biological parents (Genesis 19:4).³⁷ The word is used of the youth of the Messiah (Isaiah 7:16; 8:4), who was biologically from His mother Mary but adopted by His human father Joseph. (No text containing the word ever contrasts a *na‘ar* as a biological child with an adopted child who is allegedly not a *na‘ar*.) In many texts, youth is clearly emphasized by the word *na‘ar*.³⁸ Indeed, in many passages of Scripture *na‘ar* is employed to contrast the young with the old, at times in comprehensive terms that necessarily include youth not biologically related to the head of their household.³⁹ *Na‘ar* contrasts the “young” with the “old” as comprehensive and inclusive terms for every single person in the nation of Israel (Exodus 10:9). The word is used for a “little child” or for “little children” who do not know how to go out or come in,⁴⁰ for a child who is unable to speak (Jeremiah 1:6-7), for a child who can barely count or write (Isaiah 10:19), and for a child who is being taught how to walk (Hosea 11:1-3). A number of verses speak of children who are “young and tender.”⁴¹ The *na‘ar* is parallel to the “infant” and contrasted with the “ancient” (Isaiah 3:4-5). It is parallel

³¹ 2 Samuel 1:15; 2:14, 21; 4:12; 20:11; 1 Kings 20:14, 15, 17, 19.

³² E. g., 2 Samuel 18:5-15; 2 Kings 4:12-38; Job 1:15-19.

³³ 2 Samuel 12:16.

³⁴ 2 Samuel 1:5-6; 1 Kings 20:19-20 (note that here נַעַר and אִשׁוֹנָא possess the same referent).

³⁵ Job 29:5-8.

³⁶ E. g. נַעֲרָה, “young girl” (Genesis 24:14, 16, 28, 55, 57, 61; 34:3, 12; Exodus 2:5; Deuteronomy 22:15-16, 19-21, 23-29; Judges 19:3-6, 8-9; 21:12; Ruth 2:5-6, 8, 22-23; 3:2; 4:12; 1 Samuel 9:11; 25:42; 1 Kings 1:2-4; 2 Kings 5:2, 4; Esther 2:2-4, 7-9, 12-13; 4:4, 16; Job 40:29; Proverbs 9:3; 27:27; 31:15; Amos 2:7); נַעֲרִים, “youth, early life” (Genesis 8:21; 46:34; Leviticus 22:13; Numbers 30:4, 17; 1 Samuel 12:2; 17:33; 2 Samuel 19:8; 1 Kings 18:12; Job 13:26; 31:18; Psalms 25:7; 71:5, 17; 103:5; 127:4; 129:1-2; 144:12; Proverbs 2:17; 5:18; Isaiah 47:12, 15; 54:6; Jeremiah 2:2; 3:4, 24-25; 22:21; 31:19; 48:11; Lamentations 3:27; Ezekiel 4:14; 16:22, 43, 60; 23:3, 8, 19, 21; Hosea 2:17; Joel 1:8; Zechariah 13:5; Malachi 2:14-15); נַעַר, “youth” (Job 33:25; 36:14; Psalm 88:16; Proverbs 29:21); נַעֲרוֹת, “youth” (Jeremiah 32:30).

³⁷ Natural man-wife relationships were not exactly the norm among the sodomites in Sodom and Gomorrah.

³⁸ Psalm 119:9; Ecclesiastes 10:16; Isaiah 13:18; 65:20.

³⁹ Exodus 24:1, 5; Deuteronomy 28:50; Joshua 6:21; 2 Samuel 1:5; 2 Samuel 1:6, 13, 15; 17:18; 2 Kings 5:22; Job 29:5, 8; Lamentations 2:21; 5:13; Zechariah 2:4; 11:16.

⁴⁰ נַעַר קָטָן / נַעֲרִים קָטָנִים, 1 Kings 3:7; 11:17, 28; 2 Kings 2:23; 5:14; Isaiah 11:6.

⁴¹ 1 Chronicles 22:5; 29:1; 2 Chronicles 13:7.

to “young men”⁴² and is the opposite of “old”⁴³ and “old men” (Psalm 148:12). A sixteen-year old is one who is “yet young [*na’ar*]” (2 Chronicles 34:3). An emphasis upon having few years or being young in age is extremely common.⁴⁴ When David fought Goliath the Israelite was a “youth” (*na’ar*) while Goliath was “a man of war from his youth” (1 Samuel 17:33).⁴⁵ The phrase [*ha*]na’ar na’ar, the repetition of the word *na’ar* twice in succession, is rendered “the child was young” (1 Samuel 1:24).⁴⁶ Thus:

Na’ar always stands in contrast to *zāqēn* [old]; in many passages, it has become part of a stock phrase as an antonym to *zāqēn* . . . Gen. 19:4; Josh. 6:21; Est. 3:13 . . . Ex. 10:9; Isa. 20:4; Lam. 2:21 . . . Jer. 51:22; Ps. 148:12[.] These phrases are typical examples of merism, a figure that expresses a totality by emphasizing its opposite extremes: “young and old” . . . = “one and all.” . . . These observations show that *na’ar* clearly refers to youth. . . . [F]or the rabbis both *na’ar* and the abstract *n^e’urōt* are precise terms for youth, with the particular connotation of vigor and strength.⁴⁷

The point in Proverbs 22:6 is plainly this regular Biblical contrast between the “child” or “youth” and the aged or “old”; the *na’ar*, the “child/youth,” who is properly “trained up” will, even when “old,” continue in that right way. The question of whether a particular child is raised by adopted or biological parents is irrelevant to the text.

A king like Solomon or his son Rehoboam would have had many young servants in his royal household that required proper “training up” that they might become righteous servants of Jehovah in Israel’s theocracy. Were Proverbs 22:6 and the other Biblical texts in Proverbs restricted to biological children, then Proverbs—and essentially all the rest of Scripture—contains no instruction about how to raise servants or other non-biological youth present in the household of the addressee of Proverbs, along with vast numbers of other households over the centuries of Israel’s theocracy. Such a situation is highly unlikely.

Furthermore, a child that God brings into the world, despite that conception taking place through sin such as fornication, is still a *na’ar* to whom the promise of Proverbs 22:6 applies. A child produced in Abraham’s household through the union of Abraham with a woman other than Sarah is still a *na’ar* (Genesis 21:12, 17-20);⁴⁸ no difference in vocabulary

⁴² Isaiah 40:30; Lamentations 5:13. Indeed, just as these texts parallel the נַעַר and the בְּרוּר, so does 2 Samuel 1:1-5 parallel נַעַר and אִישׁ. The נַעַר can refer to a youth from infancy to his general manhood, but not to one who is aged or elderly. נַעַר also either always or almost always refers in the Old Testament to a youth who has not yet married.

⁴³ Esther 3:13; Job 29:8; Lamentations 2:21; Psalm 37:25; Isaiah 20:4; Jeremiah 51:20.

⁴⁴ E. g., Exodus 33:11; Joshua 6:23; Judges 8:14, 20; 13:5, 7-8, 12; 24; 17:7, 11-12; 18:3, 15; 1 Samuel 1:22, 24, 25, 27; 2:11, 17-18, 21, 26; 3:1, 8; 4:21; 17:33, 42, 55, 58; 20:35-41; 30:13, 17; 1 Chronicles 12:28; 22:5; 29:5; 2 Chronicles 13:7; 34:3.

⁴⁵ Saul tells David: נַעַר אַתָּה וְהוּא אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה מִנְעָרָיו. The abstract plural נַעֲרִים is employed for Goliath.

⁴⁶ הַנַּעַר נַעַר.

⁴⁷ H. F. Fuhs, “נַעַר,” ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 480.

⁴⁸ Note that “God was with the lad” (Genesis 21:20), although the manner in which he was conceived was sinful and contrary to God’s plan for lifelong monogamous marriage.

exists between a child born out of such a sinful conception and the twins born to Isaac and his legitimate wife (Genesis 25:27). Furthermore, *na'ar* is used for one of a different nationality from the head of the household—Joseph, the Hebrew, was a “servant” (*na'ar*) of Potiphar, the Egyptian (Genesis 41:12). Furthermore, *na'ar* can refer to biological children of parents of different nationalities (Genesis 48:16). Godly parents who obey Proverbs 22:6 need not fear that God’s promise will fail if they adopt a child born out of immorality, nor if they adopt a child of a different ethnicity or national origin. If they train him up properly, he will be saved and follow in the paths of righteousness even into his old age.

Indeed, were an ungodly familial heritage a basis for rejecting adoption or a nullification of Proverbs 22:6, Jehovah would not have led Moses to command⁴⁹ Israel to bring into their households tens of thousands of young Midianite girls⁵⁰ “for conversion, and eventually even to marry them”⁵¹ when they came of age. The Pentateuchal command only makes sense because those young children would in great numbers follow the path of righteousness in Israelite households as they were trained up in God’s way, despite their most debauched heathen heritage. Many of these adopted children of pagans would have become the wives of the generation in Israel that, under the blessing of God, entered Canaan by faith and took possession of the promised land under the smiles of heaven.

Furthermore, the godly prophet Samuel was essentially adopted into Eli the priest’s family (1 Samuel 1-2). The Lord would not have answered Hannah’s prayer and blessed her vow, and the inspired book of 1 Samuel would not present Hannah’s prayer in a positive light, if Eli’s essentially adopting Samuel and raising him from a very young age was contrary to God’s mind as expressed in Proverbs 22:6. The godly Elkanah and Hannah are in no sense presented as a negative example.

⁴⁹ וְיָרַדְתָּ in Numbers 31:18 is a command—it would have been sinful for Israel to slay these girls instead of sparing their lives and bringing them into their households.

⁵⁰ Numbers 31:17-54. The adult Midianite women had committed adultery with Israel and were worthy of death, even as the male Israelites who had sinned with these women had already been put to death (cf. Exodus 32:27); furthermore, the male children would perpetuate the wicked Midianite nation and, in their disgustingly sexually perverse culture, could well be filled with venereal diseases through the sodomy common in the pagan cultures surrounding Israel. The young virgin girls could be trained up in the way of righteousness, turn out to live for God, and be incorporated into the covenant people through marriage when they manifested their conversion in a righteous life and reached the appropriate age. Were a righteous life not what one would expect based upon proper training of children even from the most perverse family backgrounds, the Pentateuch could hardly record a judgment on Israel for taking as wives the pagan and licentious Midianite women and not long afterwards a command to incorporate young Midianite girls by the ten thousand into Israelite families with the possibility of future marriage into the holy covenant people when they came of age.

The situation in Deuteronomy 21:10-14, where an adult pagan woman is brought into an Israelite household, is not truly parallel, for it is: a.) Not commanded (as the adoption in Numbers 31:18 is a direct Divine command), but clearly only permissive; b.) Recorded for the protection of the woman; c.) Assumed to very frequently turn out badly (21:14).

⁵¹ Rashi, cited in Michael Carasik, *Numbers*, The Commentators’ Bible. Accordance electronic ed. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2011), paragraph 4055.

The uses of *na'ar* seen in the other books of the Bible continue to be valid within Proverbs itself. In the book's introduction the word is employed of youths or young men universally (Proverbs 1:4);⁵² no contrast between youth raised by biological or adopted parents, or excluding youth such as household servants, has any place whatsoever. Also, as elsewhere in Scripture, Proverbs equates the *na'ar* with the *ben*, the youth and the son (Proverbs 7:7).⁵³ When Solomon writes, "Even a child [*na'ar*] is known by his doings, whether his work *be* pure, and whether *it be* right" (Proverbs 20:11),⁵⁴ the text obviously applies to all children rather than excluding adopted ones. Only a handful of verses after Proverbs 22:6, foolishness is clearly not only bound in the heart of the biologically conceived child, but in all children, and the rod of correction is likewise effective in all (Proverbs 22:15).⁵⁵ It is similarly obvious that the command to "withhold not correction from the child [*na'ar*]" refers to all children; it is sinful disobedience to withhold correction from adopted children, or servant children in a regal household, just as much as it is to withhold correction from biologically conceived children in a household. Consequently, the promise "thou shalt beat him with the rod, and deliver his soul from hell" applies equally to the adopted and biological child (Proverbs 23:13-14).⁵⁶ Similarly, the unrestrained child who is sent away⁵⁷

⁵² The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel; To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion. (Proverbs 1:1-4)

מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה בֶן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל :
 לְדַעַת חִכְמָה וּמוֹסֵר לְהַבִּין אִמְרֵי בִינָה :
 לְקַחַת מוֹסֵר הַשֶּׁכֶל צָדֵק וּמִשְׁפָּט וּמִיֹּשְׁרִים :
 לְתֵת לַפְתָּאִים עֲרֻמָּה לְנַעַר הַעֵת וּמְזֻמָּה :

⁵³ And beheld among the simple ones, I discerned among the youths, a young man void of understanding, (Proverbs 7:7)

וְאִרְאָה בַּפְתָּאִים אֶבְיָנָה בְּבָנִים נָעַר חִסְר־לֵב :

⁵⁴ גַּם בְּמִעְלָלָיו יִתְנַכֵּר־נַעַר אִם־יֵדָּ וְאִם־יִשָּׁר פְּעֻלָּו :

⁵⁵ Foolishness *is* bound in the heart of a child; *but* the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.

אֵילֹת קְשׁוּרָה בְּלִב־נַעַר שֶׁבֵט מוֹסֵר יִרְחִיקֶנָּה מִמֶּנּוּ :

⁵⁶ Withhold not correction from the child: for *if* thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell. (Proverbs 23:13-14)

אַל־תִּמְנַע מִנַּעַר מוֹסֵר כִּי־תַכֶּנּוּ בְשֶׁבֶט לֹא יָמוּת :
 אֲתָהּ בְשֶׁבֶט תַּכֶּנּוּ וְנִפְשׁוּ מִשְׂאוֹל תַּצִּיל :

⁵⁷ מְשֻׁלָּח, "be sent off . . . be put away . . . a boy let loose (unrestrained)" (BDB); LXX *πλανόμενος*, Vulgate *puer autem qui dimittitur voluntati suae*, "a child sent away to his own pleasure." Does not this passage forbid sending one's child away to a boarding school, or even sending him away for the best part of every Monday through Friday in a public school where the rod does not enforce godly, Bible-based reproof, and require either direct homeschooling or a Christian school that works very closely with the home and enforces consistent use of both the rod and reproof? And does not this prohibition last for as long as the child in question is a youth rather than a mature man, rather than ceasing when one becomes high school or college age? How many youths have brought their parents to shame in the pagan and licentious environment of a secular college dormitory?

from his parents’ godly influences and left to himself brings his mother to shame,⁵⁸ irrespective of the biology of his conception (Proverbs 29:15).⁵⁹ All the other verses in Proverbs that refer to the *na’ar* or “child” make no distinction whatsoever between adopted and biologically conceived children; nor does Proverbs 22:6 make such a distinction. The idea that the verse applies only to biologically conceived children lacks any exegetical foundation whatever. Proverbs 22:6 does not contrast biological children with adopted children, but a “child” as a young person who must be trained in the way of righteousness, regardless of genetic makeup, with one who is “old” and is confirmed on the moral pathway on which he has long travelled. Clearly, Proverbs 22:6 is a blessed promise true for all children in a household, irrespective of the manner of their conception or the relationship of their DNA to their parents’ genetic material.

In the Old Testament, Jehovah adopted Israel to be His son (Romans 9:4) out of His love (Hosea 11:1). In the New Testament, the entire Trinity is involved in adoption.⁶⁰ The Father adopts unworthy and pagan sinners with the darkest of family heritages to become His adopted sons (Ephesians 2:1-9). The second Person, the Lord Jesus, submitted to being adopted by becoming a youth (*na’ar*, Isaiah 7:16; 8:14) who was both biologically from Mary and adopted by Joseph. Christ also died to redeem sinners in order that they might receive the adoption of sons (Galatians 4:5). The third Person, the Holy Spirit, is the “Spirit of adoption” (Romans 8:15). Clearly, parents who adopt are following the pattern set not just by godly people in the Bible, but by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Jehovah Himself. To adopt is to be like God. Nothing in Scripture anywhere states or implies that Proverbs 22:6 or other promises on childrearing are not applicable if parents follow the pattern of their God and adopt children. Just as biological parents can rejoice at the blessed promise of Proverbs 22:6 and related Biblical texts on childrearing, so can adoptive parents rejoice equally at God’s blessed promises, train up their children in the godly way that they should go, and confidently see Jehovah’s unfailing promises fulfilled. When they are old, both properly trained biological and adoptive children will continue in the godly way of their youth.

⁵⁸ The reference to the “mother” here forms an *inclusio* with Proverbs 29:3 (cf. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15–31*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005], 442).

⁵⁹ The rod and reproof give wisdom; but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame. (Proverbs 29:15)

שָׁבַט וְתוֹכַחַת יִתֵּן חֻמְּוֹתָהּ וְנִעַר מִשְׁלָהּ מִבֵּיַת אִמּוֹ :

⁶⁰ While the actions of God do provide a positive pattern for human adoption, nothing in this paragraph is intended to affirm that every single aspect of God’s redemptive adoption of sinners is equivalent to what takes place in a human adoption.