

Does the Hebrew Bible Endorse Punitive Discipline of the Child?

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Discipline as something punitive is common and very popular with traditional parenting. When we examine the passages concerning the discipline of children in the Hebrew Bible, we find a comprehensive and multifaceted concept of parenting a child. In the Hebrew Bible, disciplining a child is portrayed as much more than mere physical punishment; it embodies a holistic approach to teaching, guiding, and nurturing a child's moral and character development. This suggests that disciplining a child involves a wide range of activities to shape a child's character and behaviour. The Hebrew word for disciplining (*mûsār*) is related to educational discipline, which is fundamentally about teaching and instructing rather than punishing. This aligns with the idea of discipline as a form of pedagogy, where the goal is to educate and train the child in moral uprightness and proper conduct. The act of disciplining children in the Hebrew Bible is seen as an expression of parental love and responsibility (see Deut 8:5; Hos 7:15). This paper attempts to unravel various dimensions of the disciplining of children in the Hebrew Bible with a focus on the biblical texts that imply punitive discipline of the children.

1. *Mûsār* as Discipline, Chastening, and Correction

The Hebrew term for discipline, *mûsâr*, appears 50 times in the Hebrew Bible.¹ It is consistently employed to convey the concept of discipline, chastening, and correction, rather than punishment: discipline (of moral nature Deut 11:2; Prov 8:10, 15:10; Job 12:28, 33:16; Isa 26:16; Jer 2:30; Ezek 5:15); discipline, correction of God (Deut 11:2; Jer 17:23, 32:33, 35:13; Zeph 3:2, 7; Ps 50:17; Job 33:16; Job 36:10); the correction of (i.e. which leads to) one's shame (Job 20:3); discipline in the school of wisdom (Ezek 1:2,3, 7; 4:13; 5:12,23; 6:23; 8:23; 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 15:32, 33; 18:10, 23; 19:20, 27; 23:12, 23, 33; 24:32); paternal discipline, correction (Ezek 16:22; Prov 1:8; 4:1; 13:1); chastening and chastisement of God (Prov 3:11; Job 5:17; Isa 26:16; 53:5; Jer 2:30; 5:3; 7:28; 30:14; Hos 5:2); chastening and chastisement of man/fool (Prov 15:5; 23:13; 13:24; 15:10; 22:15; 7:22), etc. In short, the Hebrew noun *mûsâr* signifies divine and parental correction intends to impart moral discipline to a child: "My son, despise not the chastening (*mûsâr*) of the Lord; neither be weary of his correction. For whom the Lord loves he corrects; even as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prov: 3:11); "Hear, my child, the *mûsâr* of your father and forsake not the instruction of your mother" (Prov 6:20). Thus, depending on the context, the Hebrew term *mûsâr*, translated as discipline, conveys the

¹ Deut 11:2; Job 5:17; 12:18; 20:3; 36:10; 50:17; Prov 1:2,3, 7, 8; 3:11; 4:1, 13; 5:12, 23; 6:23; 7:22; 8:10, 33; 10:17; 12:1; 13:1, 18, 24; 15:5,10, 32, 33; 16:22; 19:20, 27; 22:15; 23:12, 13, 23; 24:32; Isa 26:16; 53:5; Jer 2:30; 5:3; 7:28; 10:8; 17:23; 30:14; 32:33; 35:13; Ezek 5:15; Hos 5:2; Zeph 3:2; 3:7. Out of 50 instances of *mûsâr*, it occurs 30 times in the book of Proverbs. *Strong's Concordance with Hebrew and Greek Lexicon*, s.v. *mûsâr* (4148) <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h4148/kjv/wlc/0-1/> (accessed on 5 July 2024).

idea of correction, instruction, reproof or rebuke.² It does not mean physical punishment.

2. Parenting in the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible provides limited guidance on parenting. A few instances can be observed in Exod 12:26-27, Deut 6:1-9 and the book of Proverbs.

The Mosaic instruction to observe Passover in Exod 12:24-27a has a catechetical function. As Sarna explains: “Its peculiarities arouse the curiosity of children and so afford the opportunity to impart knowledge of the national traditions to the young.”³ In these verses, Moses hands down the Passover instructions to the elders of Israel, which he has received from God (Exod 12:1-20). “When you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised,” instructs Moses (Exod 12:15), “you shall observe this rite as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants” (Exod 12:14). The instruction of Moses continues like this: “And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians ’” (Exod 12:26-27). The Passover commandments are intended to be understood by the Israelites as enduring and obligatory rules for all future generations: “lasting ordinance for you and your descendants” (Exod 12:24). This includes all those who will eventually inhabit the land of Canaan (Exod 12:25). Parents are responsible for instructing their children about the significance of the

² The KJV translates *mûsâr* in the following manner: instruction (30x), correction (8x), chasten (4x), chastisement (3x), check (1x), bond (1x), discipline (1x), doctrine (1x), rebuker (1x).

³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 60.

rite that commemorates the liberation from Egypt in each successive generation (Exod 12:26-27).⁴ A similar instruction is given in Exod 13:8: “On that day tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’”

The objective of training the children, as stated in Deut 6:1-9, is to ensure the continuation of the covenant relationship from one generation to the next (cf. Deut 4:25, 40; 5:9-10, 29). According to Deut 6:1-9, there should be a routine of instruction: “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deut 6:7-9) so that “you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life” (Deut 6:2). That is, parents must educate children, and children the grandchildren so that the essentials of the covenant might never be forgotten.⁵

2.1. The Identity of the Child in the Book of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs has much to say about the instruction of children. It instructs the children on how to live faithfully in the covenantal relationship with Yhwh. The “child” is variously described in the book: as *ben* (1:1,8,10,15; 2:1; 3:1,11,12,21; 4:1 (pl.), 3, 10, 20; 5:1, 7 (pl), 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1, 24 (pl.); 8:31 (pl.); 10:1, 5; 13:1,22 (pl.), 24 (pl.); 14:26 (pl.); 15:11 (pl.), 20; 17:2, 6 (pl. x2), 25 (pl.);

⁴Douglas K. Stuart, Vol. 2, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2007, c2006), 289.

⁵Cf. Eugene H. Merrill, Vol. 4, *Deuteronomy: The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1994), 166.

19:13, 18,26,27; 20:7 (pl.); 23:15, 19,26; 24:13; 27:11; 28:7; 29:17 (pl.); 30:1, 4; as *na'ar* (1:4; 20:11; 22:6, 15; 23:13; 29:15); as *bar* (31:2, twice).⁶ The child (*ben*) in the Proverbs appears to be young, capable of participating in ambushes and robbery (Prov 1:11), seeking wisdom as though for silver (Prov 2:1-4), and capable of engaging in affectionate discourse (Prov 7:4-5). In general, *na'ar* in the book of Proverbs refers to a young person (male), perhaps of teenage or adolescent or marriageable age (but not yet married), not an infant or pre-teen.⁷ The youth may have their heart bound up with folly (Prov 22:15), but such association with folly is remediable through discipline (Prov 23:13; 29:15).⁸ The child is variously located in the book: “in the home (Prov 1:8; 4:1, 3,10; 6:20), on the street corners (Prov 1:10,15), and in palaces (Prov 1:1; 31:1 -2).

According to Ericka S. Dunbar and Kenneth N. Ngwa, the child in the book of Proverbs and the child of the proverbial world is a complex and multivalent character.⁹ Rhetorically a presumed author of the proverbial text and worldview (Prov 1:1; 30:1; 31:1-2), the child is also the target audience for the sage and the subject matter of

⁶ According to Ericka S. Dunbar and Kenneth N. Ngwa, “These child-related terms reflect social nuances that allude to male children’s growth and development, as well as their intrinsic value in ancient Israelite families and societies. The male gendered terminology clearly reflects the patriarchal context and ideology of the book,” *Children in Proverbs, Proverbial Children*,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World*, Sharon Betsworth and Julie Faith Parker (eds). (Bloomsbury, London 2018), 132. However, many of the counsel directed at a male child would apply to a female child as well (e.g., 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1-5, 3:1, 11, 21; 4:10, 5:1; 6:20; 7:20).

⁷ Douglas K. Stuart, “‘Hie Cool of the Day’ (Gen 3:8) and ‘The Way He Should Go’ (Prov. 22:6),” *BSac* 171 (2014): 268. *Na'ar* can be used interchangeably with *ben* (see Exod 2:2,6; Gen 22:2,5; Job 1:5,19; 1 Sam 30:17; 2 Sam 18:5; 1 Chron 12:29).

⁸ See Ericka S. Dunbar and Kenneth N. Ngwa, “Children in Proverbs, Proverbial Children,” 134.

⁹ *Ibid.*,131.

proverbial speech.¹⁰ Thus, the “child” in the book of Proverbs functions as a literary generic abstraction, not a particular individual.¹¹ The socio-economic settings where the child is expected to function vary from patriarchal family and kinship farms (Prov 10:5) to peer group activities on the street corners of the urban settings (Prov 1:20-21).¹² The child is centrally important to social and cultural portraits of parental honour/shame (Prov 10:1; 27:11; 29:17), parental identity (Prov 19:26), the formation of intergenerational identity and status (Prov 13:22; 17:6), interethnic bonding (Prov 5:20) and social relations, particularly in fostering neighbourhood relationship (Prov 6:1,3).¹³ The child elicits emotions related to ancestry (Prov 1:1; 30:1; 31:1-2), customs (Prov 4:3), and even legends (Prov 8:22; 30:4) of societal formation and inclusion. According to Temper Longman, the distinction between biological, professional, and scribal relationships is not always clear-cut, and significant overlaps between these types of social relationships may exist.¹⁴ What is clear is that the proverbial child, whether biological, professional, or scribal, is a versatile character whose identity and social roles shape communal identity and challenge the boundaries and longevity of tradition and the consequences of innovation.¹⁵

2.2. Disciplining of Children in the Book of Proverbs

In this polyvalent role of the child in the book of Proverbs, the child is subjected to the sage’s ideological discipline (Prov 13:24;

¹⁰ Ibid.,131.

¹¹ Ibi., 132

¹² Ibid. 132

¹³ Cf. Ibid.

¹⁴ Temper Longman III, *Proverbs* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 54.

¹⁵ Ericka S. Dunbar and Kenneth N. Ngwa, “Children in Proverbs, Proverbial Children,” 139.

19:18; 23:13; 29:17 etc.). According to the book of Proverbs, the discipline process ultimately produces joy. For example, Prov 29:17 says, “Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; yes, he will give delight to your soul.” Prov 22:6 says: “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Prov 3:11-12 says, “My son do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof. For the Lord reproves him whom he loves as a father, the son in whom he delights.” It implies that God disciplines his children because he loves them. Prov 19:18 says, “Discipline your son for there is hope. Do not set your heart on putting him to death.” So discipline leads to hope, and discipline is meant to overcome death, their sinful nature.

Discipline in the book of Proverbs, and elsewhere in biblical tradition, conveys the basic meaning of correction aimed at avoiding moral fault and acquiring moral insight.¹⁶ It is a wide-ranging concept that includes honesty and truthfulness (e.g., Prov 12:17, 19; 14:25; 24:26), self-control (e.g., Prov 12:16; 14:29; 29:11), productivity (as opposed to laziness, e.g., Prov 6:6-9; 12:24, 27; 31:27), generosity (e.g., Prov 11:25; 21:26; 22:9), piety (e.g., Prov 1:7; 2:5; 37; 8:13; 15:33; 31:30), independence (e.g., Prov 6:1-3; 31:10-30), etc.¹⁷ The book of Proverbs outlines a comprehensive approach to disciplining children:

1. It urges parents to teach children to fear God. According to the book of Proverbs, “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; cf. Pss 111:10; 111:3; Job

¹⁶ See Michael v. Fox, *Proverbs, 1-9, Anchor Bible Commmentary 18A* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 34-35.

¹⁷ William P. Brown, “To Discipline without Destruction: The Multifaceted Profile of the Child in Proverbs,” *The Child in the Bible*, Marcia J. Bunge (eds.) (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 69.

28:28; Eccl 12:13; Mic 6:9). Furthermore, when children fear God, they will also fear sin. It will spare them much grief in life by keeping them from evil (Prov 16:6). It may also literally prolong their lives: “The fear of God prolongs days, but the years of the wicked will be shortened” (Prov 10:27); “The fear of God is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death” (Prov 14:27). “The fear of God leads to life, and he who has it will abide in satisfaction; he will not be visited with evil” (Prov 19:23). Fearing God is more profitable than wealth: “Better is a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure with trouble” (Prov 15:16); “In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge” (Prov 14:26).

2. It includes warnings to children to heed the lessons about life. For it says: “My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother; for they will be a graceful ornament on your head, and chains about your neck” (Prov 1:8-9); “My son ... receive my words, and treasure my commands within you” (Prov 2:1); “My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands” (Prov 3:1); “Hear, my children, the instruction of a father, and give attention to know understanding” (Prov 4:1); “Hear, my son, and receive my sayings, and the years of your life will be many” (Prov 4:10); “My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings” (Prov 4:20); “My son, pay attention to my wisdom; lend your ear to my understanding” (Prov 5:1); “My son, keep your father’s command, and do not forsake the law of your mother” (Prov 6:20); “My son, keep my words, and treasure my commands within you” (Prov 7:1) etc.
3. It has several warnings about the dangers of youth being seduced by the wrong kind of women (Prov 2:16-19; 5:3-13, 20; 6:23-29; 7:5-27; 22:14; 31:30). The book of Proverbs

urges parents to caution their children against fornication (Prov 7:6-23). Parents need to teach their children about the deadly dangers of succumbing to fleshly lusts (Prov 7:24-27). However, it also teaches them to enjoy their spouses (Prov 5:15, 18-20).

4. It heartens children to seek wisdom (Prov 2:1-6). The father's primary appeal to his son in Prov 8 is to pursue wisdom: "Wisdom is better than rubies, and all the things one may desire cannot be compared with her" (Prov 8:12-30). "A wise man fears and departs from evil" (Prov 14:16). "He who restrains his lips is wise" (Prov 10:19). "He who wins souls is wise" (Prov 11:30). "He who heeds counsel is wise" (Prov 12:15).
5. It encourages parents to instruct their children on the importance of protecting their thoughts: for example, Prov 4:23 says, "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life." The book of Proverbs often speaks of "the heart" as the seat of emotions and the intellect. The heart is usually a synonym for the mind: "as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (Prov 23:7).
6. It urges parents to teach children to obey their parents: "My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother" (Prov 1:8; 4:1-4; 6:20-23). Further, it continues, "The eye that mocks his father, and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it" (Prov 30:17). Prov 3:11-12 says, "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor detest His correction; for whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights." The child should heed the instruction of both father and mother (Prov 1:8), as well as respect and please the mother (Prov 23:22,25), being careful not to disgrace her (Prov 19:26;

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- 20:20; 29:15). The child should listen to their father (Prov 23:22) and submit to the parent: “Give your heart to me, my son!” (Prov 23:26). The wise child makes parents glad (Prov 10:1; 15:20; 23:24), and is the product of parental discipline (Prov 13:1), while the foolish child is the source of parental grief (Prov 10:1; 15:20; 17:25; 19:13), and disgrace (Prov 19:26).
7. It instructs parents to educate their children to adhere to the teachings of wisdom (Prov 19:27), which includes the behaviour of a wise child towards their parent (Prov 23:15-18). It appeals to the child to stay away from social ills such as drunkenness, gluttony, and drowsiness (Prov 23:19). It requests not to envy the wicked (Prov 24:21) and commands to be wise: “Be wise, my son!” (Prov 27:11).
 8. It underscores the need to honour parents with children’s words (Prov 20:20; 30:11), even with their facial expressions (Prov 30:17) and by hearkening to their counsel (Prov 23:22-25). According to Prov 10:1, a wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is his mother’s grief.
 9. It encourages parents to teach children to choose their companions wisely: “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed” (Prov 13:20). Prov 1:10 says, “My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.” Wisdom is more or less epitomized by the ability to avoid deleterious companions (Prov 2:10-15). True wisdom has the effect of delivering us from evil companions and the subtleties of evildoers (Prov 2:16-19).
 10. It asks parents to teach their children to watch their words. There are many reminders about the importance of watching one’s words: “Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put perverse lips far from you” (Prov 4:24); “The mouth of the righteous is a well of life” (Prov 10:11); “In the multitude of
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words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (Prov 10:19); “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver” (Prov 10:20); “The lips of the righteous feed many” (Prov 10:21); “The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable” (Prov 10:32); “There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Prov 12:18,); “The lips of the wise disperse knowledge” (Prov 15:7); “The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, and adds learning to his lips” (Prov 16:23); “The lips of knowledge are a precious jewel” (Prov 20:15), etc.

11. It encourages parents to instruct their children in the pursuit of their work and to instil in them the importance of diligent effort: “Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, which, having no captain, overseer or ruler, provides her supplies in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest” (Prov 6:6-8). They also need to be taught how to plan. Otherwise, children will grow up to be sluggards (Prov 6:9-11). On the other hand, the person who pursues his work earns a good living, has plenty of food, and earns respect. “Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before unknown men” (Prov 22:29). “He who has a slack hand becomes poor, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. He who gathers in summer is a wise son; he who sleeps in harvest is a son who causes shame” (Prov 10:4-5).
12. It asks parents to teach their children how to manage their money. It says generosity is a wiser financial policy than miserliness (Prov 11:24-26). Kindness to the poor unleashes the Lord’s blessings (Prov 19:17; 22:9). The wise person works hard and plans for the future (Prov 10:4-5). Prov 15:27, for example, teaches the folly of seeking financial gain through evil means: “He who is greedy for gain troubles his

own house, but he who hates bribes will live.” Prov 6:1-5 describes the dangers of co-signing with either friends or strangers in get-rich-quick schemes. Furthermore, “Do not overwork to be rich” (Prov 23:4). “He who trusts in his riches will fall” (Prov 11:28). “He who oppresses the poor to increase his riches, and he who gives to the rich, will surely come to poverty” (Prov 22:16).

13. It asks parents to teach their children to love their neighbours (Prov 3:27-29). Prov 25:21-22 says, “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you.”

3. What Does the Book of Proverbs say about Spanking?

However, there are a few instances in the book of Proverbs where spanking is implied in the disciplining of children (Prov 10:13; 13:24; 14:3; 22:8,15; 23:13-14; 26:3; 29:15). The actual meaning of these verses can only be comprehended by considering the overall views of parenting the child as described in the book above.

3.1. Proverbs 10:13

In the lips of him that hath understanding wisdom is found: but a rod is for the back of him that is void of understanding.

How do we understand the term rod in this verse? The term “rod” used in the above-listed proverbs (Prov 10:13; 13:24; 14:3; 22:8,15; 23:13-14; 26:3; 29:15) corresponds to the Hebrew word *shêbet*. The term *shêbet* is employed in multiple contexts within the Hebrew Bible, encompassing meanings such as rod, staff, branch, offshoot,

club (referring to a shepherd's equipment), sceptre, and tribe.¹⁸ Out of the 190 occurrences of *shêbet* in the Hebrew Bible, it is mainly used to refer to a clan or tribe (131 times),¹⁹ as seen in passages such as Josh 1:12, 3:12, 4:2, 4, 5, 8, 12, 7:14, 16, 11:23, 12:6, 7, 13:7, and 14 etc. The sceptre has historically symbolized authority and has been associated with figures such as God, kings, judges, military leaders, and priests (cf. Gen 49:10; Num 24:17; Ps 2:9; 45: 6-7; 74:2; Is 9:4; 10:5; 15, 24; 11:4; 14:5; 14:29; 30:31; Ezek 19:11, 14; 21:13; Amos 1:5, 8; Mic 5:1; 7:14; Zech 10:11). In Psalm 23:4, the term *shêbet* refers to a shepherd's crook, which serves to provide comfort to the sheep: "Your *shêbet* and your staff, they comfort me." When interpreted within the context of the *shêbet* mentioned in Psalm 23, it represents assistance, direction, and supernatural power.²⁰ The physical punishment is implied only in a few instances of *shêbet* in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Exod 21:20; 2 Sam 7:14-15; Job 9:34; Lam 3:1 etc).

When and How the rod (*shêbet*) is used in the Hebrew Bible?

- It is used as harsh punishment for those found guilty of a civil or religious crime (2 Sam 7:14).
- It is used proportionately to the offence or crime (Deut 25:2).
- The number of strokes can be up to forty for free people or non-slaves (Deut 25:3).
- The offender has to lie down on his face to be beaten on the back (Deut 25:2; Isa 50:6).

¹⁸Strong's Concordance with Hebrew and Greek Lexicon, s.v. *shêbet* (7626) <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h4148/kjv/wlc/0-1/> (accessed on 5 July 2024).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Shepherds commonly employ the staff to manage and redirect sheep.

- The strikes should be on the back and not on the butt (Prov 10:13; 19:29; 26:3; Isa 50:6).
- Leaving bruises or marks on the back or side (such as the ribs) is considered good, but there must be no permanent injury (Prov 20:30).
- The offender must be able to get up one or two days after the beating (Exod 21:20-27).

Prov 10:13 manifests wisdom when imparted to a foolish person and serves as a means of discipline (Prov 22:15; 23:13). The lines are not contradictory but supplementary. The term rod refers to an additional attribute symbolically associated with the wise in their discourse context. While it is characteristic of love to conceal wrongdoings (Prov 10:12b), those who are intelligent possess the ability to discipline successfully (Prov 10:13).²¹ The wisdom of the wise is evident in the utterances that emanate from their mouths; conversely, the folly of the foolish is not only evident in their speech but also invites retribution upon them.²² The phrase “rod for the back” is a synecdoche that symbolizes the entire range of enforced discipline.²³

As we know, the context of Prov 10:13 is a comparison between wise sons and foolish sons. It compares those who have godly understanding to those with bad character. One who is void of understanding, fool, is essentially one who denies God. He takes God’s name in vain (Prov 26:3 with 13:24; 14:3; 22:8, 15; 23:13; and 29:15), and his mouth invites flogging (Prov 18:6). He deliberately

²¹ Fox, M. V., *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 518.

²² Barnes, A., *Notes on the Old Testament: Proverbs to Ezekiel*, F. C. Cook & J. M. Fuller, (eds.) (London: John Murray, 1879), 34.

²³ Schwab, G. M., *The Book of Proverbs. In Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 7: The Book of Psalms, The Book of Proverbs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 526.

chooses to walk the path of unrighteousness, violating God’s Law to the extent that he deserves punishment (Deut 25:3). The phrase “lacks judgment” (*hāsar-lēb*) is used in Proverbs to refer to the fool who does not think before he speaks.²⁴ As Waltke argues, “a person in authority, such as God (Job 21:9; 37:13), a father (Prov 13:23–24; 22:15; 29:15), or the Messiah (Ps 2:9) used it to inflict remedial punishment on a slave (Exod 21:20), a fool (Prov 26:3), and a son (Prov 13:24; 22:15; 23:13–14; 29:15; cf. 2 Sam 7:14; Isa. 10:15). Corrective caning was applied to the back (*legēw*; cf. 19:29; 26:3b) of the one who lacks sense (*hasar-lēb*; see 6:32).”²⁵ Individuals who lack intelligence or understanding will be subjected to physical punishment using a rod. In short, the rod was not primarily intended to cause bodily injury but to employ firmness and guidance in punishment. It is “emblematic of diligent discipline.”²⁶

In the above context, Prov 10:13 does not advise a parent to use the rod on the child. Rather, it contrasts with the wise son and fool. It is illogical to interpret Proverbs 10:13 as referring to small children. As the book of Proverbs outlined and explained, young children lack the cognitive ability to comprehend and exhibit moral judgment, wisdom, or foolishness. They lack the ability to talk with judgment or articulate moral wisdom until a later stage of their life.

3.2 Proverbs 13:24

²⁴ Bland, D., *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs. The College Press NIV commentary* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 2002), 115.

²⁵ Waltke, B. K., *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 1-15*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 462.

²⁶ William P. Brown, “To Discipline without Destruction: The Multifaceted Profile of the Child in Proverbs,” 69

Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.

The context of Prov 13:24 is again a comparison between wise sons and ignorant sons, as shown in verse 13:1. Those who are wise live in the domain of love, particularly within the love of God. Individuals lacking wisdom inhabit a realm characterized by hostility and ill will (cf. Eph 4:17-19). A father who neglects to punish his defiant child successfully supports a way of life characterized by animosity (as seen by the cases of Eli's sons in 1 Sam 2:12 and David's son Absalom in 2 Sam 13). If the disobedient son does not recognize the consequences of his rebellious actions or refuses to accept the idea of being punished, he would display his own lack of wisdom. Innately, parents possess a strong dislike for observing their sons experiencing discomfort or committing harm to themselves. As a result, this motivates parents to employ disciplinary methods to handle acts of defiance. Hence, Prov 13:24 depicts a caring father genuinely worried about his child rather than a command to discipline him.²⁷

As Waltke says, “the home is the basic social unit for transmitting values (cf. Exod. 20:12).”²⁸ Therefore, “the one who holds back (*hōšēk*; see 10:19; 11:24) his rod of remedial punishment (*šibṭō*; see 10:13) is one who hates (*šōnē*, see 1:22) his son (*benō*; see 1:8). But the one who loves him (*we'ōhabō*; see 1:22), in spite of the difficulties involved, seeks him diligently (*šiharō*; see 1:28; 7:15;

²⁷ Ben Sira, who dilates on this principle with vehemence (Sir 30:1-13), restates the present verse as “He who loves his son persists [*endelechēsei*] in beating him” (Sir 30:1). And further, “Smash his loins when he is still young. Bow his head down when he is young, and split his loins when he is small” (Sir 30:12b-13).

²⁸ Waltke, B. K., *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 1-15*, 574.

8:17; 11:27) with discipline (see 1:2).”²⁹ According to Prov 20:30, inflicting symbolical wounds on a son with enough severity to cause visible marks could perhaps have a therapeutic impact: Purge the inmost being (Prov 20:30b); drive [folly] far from him (Prov 22:15b). Avoidance of the situations as mentioned above should not occur when foolishness is deeply ingrained in the nature of a child (Prov 22:15a). That is why proverbs refer to the rod to cause a symbolic injury as the rod of educational discipline (*mūsār*). The Proverbs regard fathers who neglect using such a rod as not really loving their sons, but actually hating them (Prov 13:24).³⁰ A father should never lose hope (Prov 19:18a) or wish his son’s destruction (Prov 19:18b). Loving parents (see Prov 1:8; 10:1) seek to correct the faults of their children because their children’s lives are at stake. Parents who lack affection for their children abandon them and expose them to dangerous circumstances (Prov 13:14-18). In short, loving parents actively strive for the well-being of their children, while unloving parents hand them over to evil. So, again, In the above context, Prov 13:24 does not advise a parent to use the rod on the child.

3.3. Proverbs 14:3

In the mouth of the fool is a rod of pride, but the lips of the wise will guard them.

This passage juxtaposes the detrimental consequences of the arrogant fool’s discourse with the protection afforded by the wise man’s speech. The fool’s arrogance leads to self-inflicted harm and harm to others. In contrast, individuals who possess wisdom

²⁹ Ibid. The word *šiharō* has two possibilities. It may be translated “is careful in disciplining” (NIV) but may be better rendered “treats him early with discipline.” Ross, A. P., “Proverbs,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, F. E. Gaebelein, (ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 982.

³⁰ Miller, J. W., *Proverbs. Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2004), 160.

safeguard themselves from unnecessary suffering by exercising prudent judgment (cf. Prov 10:13; 26:3). The phrase “in the mouth” (see 11:9, 11) designates the rod as the tongue of a fool (see Prov 1:7; 12:15, 16). The term “rod” or “branch” (*hōṭer*) used as a metaphor for the tongue is an example of metonymy, where it represents communication.³¹ “The rod in the mouth” is often sharper than the rod in the hand (Jer 18:18.). Sometimes it strikes against God (Exod 5:2. Ps 12:3, 4; 2 Kgs, 19:10). Whereas the lips of the wise are said to give food (Prov 10:21), dispense knowledge (Prov 15:7), or keep knowledge (Prov 5:2), or save (cf. Prov 10:11).³² Thus, the proverb in 14:3, along with several others, presupposes the prudence of speech, and advises caution in one’s choice of words. So, again, in the above context, Prov 14:3 does not advise a parent to use the rod on the child.

3.4. Proverbs 22:8

Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity and the rod they wield in fury will be broken.

In the context of harvesting, the term rod (*shēbet*) refers to the flail that is employed to thresh grain. The evil actions of the wicked individual will result in the growth of harmful consequences, like toxic grain. Furthermore, their expression of fury, symbolized by the flail, will be ineffective in mitigating the peril they encounter.³³ “The one who sows” (see Prov 11:18) “will reap” is used metaphorically to describe the connection between an action and its consequences (cf. Job 4:8; Hos. 8:7; 10:12f).

³¹ The only other occurrence of *hōṭer* in Isa 11:1 denotes a new shoot, a branch, coming out of a stump. Waltke, B. K. *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 1-15*, 585.

³² Toy, C. H., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1899), 281.

³³ Fox, M. V., *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 699.

The initial statement asserts that those who engage in the act of sowing “wickedness/injustice” (*‘awlāh*) would inevitably experience the consequences of “trouble/calamity” (*‘āwen*). The second phrase seems to elaborate on this concept by explaining how it operates: “The rod of his fury [*shēbet* *‘ēbrāṭō*] will be destroyed.” The symbol of the rod here represents his power to do evil. The term calamity/trouble (*‘āwen*) refers to the misuse of power to harm and destroy (see Prov 6:12). It can also describe deceit or the absence of value. The malicious use of authority is frequently linked to “deception” and “lying,” and this figurative language leads to the less common notion of “nothingness” or “vanity.” The saying, however, suggests that the unjust will face the consequences of their actions when those they mistreat rise against them, ultimately ending their anger and cruelty. Paradoxically, the unjust individual planted seeds of injustice, expecting to gain more than he put in. Yet, the wealth he acquires in exchange is illusory, as it will ultimately amount to nothing. In sum, divine retribution demands that those who abuse their power will end in utter and eternal disappointment (cf. Prov 10:28; 11:7; 11:18, 19; 12:3; 13:9, 25; 21:12; 24:19-20; 28:22).³⁴ So, again, in the above context, Prov 22:8 does not imply a parent to use the rod on the child as physical punishment.

3.5. Proverbs 22:15

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.

This proverb implies that the child born with evil inclinations (cf. Gen 8:21; Isa 48:8; Job 14:4; 25:4; Ps 51:5 [7]; Isa 48:8) can be disciplined with a rod of discipline. Folly is bound up (Prov 3:3; Gen 44:30) in the heart (Prov 2:11) of a youth (Prov 1:4; 22:6). But the

³⁴Waltke, B. K., *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 208.

father's disciplining rod (see Prov 1:2; 22:8) will remove it far (see Prov 19:7) from him (see Prov 22:5, 6). The folly (*'iwwelet*) is the worst sort evil, as it is perverse and mainly immune to reform (Prov 27:22). The child is morally immature, but discipline will remove a child's bent to folly (Prov 13:24; 23:13, 16; 29:15).³⁵ Left to his own inclinations, a child will go wrong (see Prov 29:15). Therefore, the proverb says, "If folly is bound to the heart of a child, the rod of discipline will remove it from him." Since folly incurs the Lord's curse (Prov 22:14b), this proverb seeks to protect the youth from eternal death by the father's relatively light sting. It is precisely because the youth is inwardly foolish that he or she must be dedicated to the discipline of the right path (Prov 22:5-6). So, again, the context of Prov 22:15 is moral instruction and discipline of the child. Therefore, the language of the rod is primarily figurative rather than punitive.

3.6. Proverbs 23:13-14

Do not hold back discipline from the child, although you strike him with the rod, he will not die. You shall strike him with the rod and rescue his soul from Sheol.

This warning to parents seems rather harsh. The instruction to not withhold (see 3:27; 11:26) discipline (*mûsār*) from a youth (see 1:4; 22:6) refers to the act of administering physical punishment, specifically flogging, to an inexperienced individual who lacks wisdom. *Striking* (see Prov 17:10) *with the rod* (see Prov 10:13) refers to a severe, but not fatal, flogging to cleanse the youth and to prevent the repetition of his folly (cf. Prov 17:10, 26; 19:25; 20:30). Therefore, this form of discipline is believed to be beneficial for the person's overall well-being and development.³⁶

³⁵Ross, A. P., "Proverbs," 1064.

Moreover, this warning to parents should be read in light of the succeeding instruction in verses 13:15-16, which speaks of the affection a father has for his son.”³⁷ As Bland argues, this expression is “a hyperbole and may be similar to today’s parents exhorting teenagers to complete a difficult work task, “It’s not going to kill you.” The goal of the punishment is not the venting of parental anger and frustration but the saving of a youth’s life from untimely death (see 13:24; Eph 6:4).”³⁸ “In Proverbs, the rod is always administered in the context of a loving family environment (13:24b).

Prov 23:13-14, perhaps, is the most commonly used “prooftext” to defend spanking. The Hebrew term for “smite” or “kill” is commonly translated as *nakah*. In Gen 8:21, the word *nakah* describes God’s action towards humanity, stating that He will never strike every living creature again as He did before. The term used to describe Moses’ killing of the Egyptian in Exod 2:12 is identical. “[Moses] looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he *nakah* the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.” Undoubtedly, the phrase *nakah* is employed more than twelve times in the Exodus narrative to depict God’s actions against the Egyptians. For instance, God *nakah* the river, transforming it into blood, and also *nakah* the firstborn child of every Egyptian. The concept being conveyed is that *nakah* refers to a type of intense physical discipline or punishment, frequently resulting in death. In Exodus 21:20, the Hebrew words *nakah* and *shêbet* are used in the same way as in Proverbs 23. It states that if a man strikes his male or female slave with a *shêbet* and the slave dies as a result, the man will face retribution.

³⁶ Waltke, B. K., *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 252.

³⁷ Bland, D., *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs. The College Press NIV commentary* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., (2002), 210.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

How can we effectively include this language in the argument supporting spanking? Can we morally justify harming a child as a form of punishment, as long as it does not result in their death? In short, the *shêbet* and *nakah* passages in the book of Proverbs are primarily figurative, employing hyperbole like many other proverbs. Prov 22:17-24:34 comprise a compilation of the sayings of the wise, and it is not an authoritative directive. Therefore, this verse cannot mean a parent must spank a child to save a child from going to Hell.

3.7. Proverbs 26:3

A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool's back.

This verse is consistent with the other verses we have already discussed. The essence of this saying is that the “fool” (*kesîl*) is equally challenging to control, just like a donkey or horse. “The ass, the favorite riding-animal (Gen 22:3, Judg 1:14, 1Sam 25:20, Zech 9:9), hardly needed the whip in moving over the rough mountain roads of Palestine; but for horses, rarely employed except in war and on plains (Prov 21:31, 2 Sam 15:1, 2 Kgs 9:18, Isa 31:1, Job 39:18, 19), the whip might be useful.”³⁹ Both the fool and these animals do not react to reason and require coercion through the use of a whip, halter, or rod, specifically in the case of the fool (Prov 19:29).⁴⁰ A whip prods a warhorse (Prov 21:31) and restrains and controls a donkey (2Kgs 19:28). Thus, a rod restrains fools from their folly and prods them to conform their lives to wisdom.⁴¹ There is little hope of educating the fool with words (17:10, 16; 23:9). “Brute force, not words, is fitting to goad and govern animals and fools, for it is the

³⁹Toy, C. H. *A critical and exegetical commentary on the book of Proverbs*, 472.

⁴⁰Ross, A. P., “Proverbs,” 1087.

⁴¹Waltke, B. K., *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 348. Hebrew lacks the verb and simply brings together elements that belong with one another: whip and horse, bridle and ass, rod and the fool's back (cf. Isa 1:2-3).

language both understand (cf. Prov 10:13; 17:10; 18:6; 19:29; 27:22; Ps 32:9; Sir 33:24).⁴² Why does a fool need a rod? Because he refuses to be guided by the Lord's eye (Ps 32:8, 9). They do not learn from wise reproof (17:10; 19:25). The only language fools understand is the language of brute force.⁴³ So, sayings like this are advice on how to treat fools and a warning to boys not to be one of them.

3.8. Proverbs 29:15

The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.

Like all the other verses we have discussed, this is an observation, not an imperative. This saying contrasts “a rod of correction” and leaving a child alone (*mešullāh*).⁴⁴ A rod (*shêbet*, the symbol of chastisement and discipline (Prov 10:13), and a rebuke (*w^etōkahat*, 1:23) could be viewed as a hendiadys meaning “a rod of correction” (Prov 13:24, 23:13). While the “rod of correction” (literally “rod and rebuke” *šebet w^etōkahat*) can include spanking when called for, it can also refer to verbal correction. The neglected child receives neither spankings nor verbal correction. This child may well grow up to disgrace his parents.⁴⁵ Physical caning and verbal rebuke are important and severe methods for disciplining a young person (cf. Prov 13:24; 19:18; 20:30; 22:6, 15; 23:14).⁴⁶ Within the broader context of Proverbs, the wise primarily utilized verbal reprimands rather than physical punishment as their main tool (see Prov 25:12; 27:5-6; 28:23 for the meaning of “rebuke”).⁴⁷ So, again,

⁴² Waltke, B. K., *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 348.

⁴³ Bland, D., *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, 234.

⁴⁴ Ross, A. P., “Proverbs,” 1115.

⁴⁵ Ehlke, R. C., *Proverbs. The People's Bible* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Pub. House, 2001), 292.

⁴⁶ Waltke, B. K., *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 442.

⁴⁷ Bland, D., *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, 264.

the context of Prov 29:15 is moral instruction and discipline of the child; therefore, the language of “rod and rebuke” is primarily a verbal reprimand rather than punitive.

Conclusion

Disciplining of children in the Hebrew Bible goes beyond physical punishment; it encompasses a pedagogical approach rooted in parental love and responsibility, aiming to educate and guide children in moral and character development. This understanding contrasts with the punitive view of discipline often associated with traditional parenting approaches. Although the Hebrew Bible includes passages (Prov 10:13; 13:24; 14:3; 22:8,15; 23:13-14; 26:3; 29:15) that can be understood as supporting disciplinary actions, including physical correction, the language and contexts of these texts do not advocate for physical discipline of the child. An analysis of these verses reveals that they emphasize non-corporal and constructive methods of discipline that foster a child’s emotional and personality development. Hence, we can conclude that corporal punishment of children does not technically apply in the Hebrew Bible.