

OBEDIENCE AS HEALING WISDOM IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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Abstract:

Obedience to God's instructions is the key of the teachings of the book of Proverbs. A wise person is one who upholds the instructions and teachings of his teacher and father, and of course, God's instructions. This article looks at the book of Proverbs from the perspective that wisdom is the ability of a person to conduct their life in the best conceivable way and to the best result. The article informs that healing connotes 'restore', 'prolongation of life' and 'soundness'. It shows that obedience is listen to, heed by acting upon, or putting into practice what has been said. The article, therefore, demonstrates that obedience to instructions is healing wisdom to the individual. In other words, when one obeys instructions, the person gains wisdom that brings healing and good health.

Key words: obedience, healing, wisdom, book of Proverbs

INTRODUCTION

Obedience is an important subject of the Book of Proverbs. It teaches the importance of obedience of a pupil/son to the instructions of the teacher/father. One of such instructions is to obey instructions to experience health and healing. The article seeks to show that one of the benefits of obedience is healing. The article defines the terms 'obedience', 'healing' and 'wisdom'. It looks at 'search for order' as a worldview of the Wisdom literature and shows the relationship between wisdom and healing. The article further discusses the fact that 'the fear of the LORD' is obedience to God's laws. It continues to demonstrate that wisdom is the path of life. The article ends with an exposition of some texts in Proverbs to show obedience as healing wisdom in Proverbs. The study shows that walking in wisdom, which is obedience to the teacher's instruction of God's way, leads to physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological wellbeing of a person. It also shows disobedience, which is sin, leads to death.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Obedience

The word 'obedience' is translated from the Hebrew word שָׁמַע. The word means 'to hear', 'listen to', 'pay attention', 'heed', 'obey'.¹ In a variety of contexts, שָׁמַע denotes listen to, heed by acting upon, or putting into practice what has been said. Where the listener is subject to the authority of the speaker, it readily comes to mean obey. Obedience to a person is often expressed through listening to the voice of the person. In the Old Testament, *hearing* may refer to YHWH's commandments and instructions. So, since hearing YHWH occurs within a relationship of sovereignty and submission, שָׁמַע can mean 'to obey, be obedient'.² In the

¹ See Hermann J. Austel, 'שָׁמַע', in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 938; William Wilson, 'Obey', in *New Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1987), 290; Aaron Pick, 'Obedient', in *Dictionary of Old Testament Words for English Readers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982), 290-91; Francis Brown, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 1033; Kenneth T. Aitken, 'שָׁמַע', in Willem A. Van Gemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 175.

² Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1379.

context of wisdom teaching, a summons to listen attentively ('paying attention') occurs. In Proverbs, many sayings reflect on the wisdom of heeding advice, rebuke, correction and instruction (Prov 12:15; 13:1; 15:31-32; 19:27; 25:12). The teacher's summons to receive instruction is reinforced by terms stressing that to attend and accept his words involve putting them into practice. The pupil must listen to them; his words are commands that the son must keep (שמע, 4:4; 7:1-2). The figure of personified Wisdom, therefore pronounces her benediction on those who 'listen to me' and 'keep my ways' (8:32-34; cf. 1:33).³

Healing

The Hebrew word, the verb רפא occurs around seventy times with the dominant meaning 'heal' in both a figurative and literal sense.⁴ In the *qal* form, the word means 'heal', 'restore', 'mend'. The *niphal* form of the word means 'be healed', 'be cured/remitted', 'be repaired'. The *piel* form means 'heal', 'treat (medically)'. The *hitpael* form means 'recover', 'be healed'.

In a small number of texts, רפא is used as a noun meaning 'physician'. It also indicates healing in the sense of personal renewal (cf. Pss 41:4; 147:3; Eccl 3:3). In some cases, it speaks of heart renewal or conversion (Isa 6:10; 30:26). In other instances, it is used to indicate forgiveness of sins (Isa 53:5; Jer 3:22; 17:14; Hos 6:1). Furthermore, רפא is used to refer to healing in the sense of being cared for, after being neglected (Ezek 34:4; Zech 11:16).⁵

מרפא is used in many instances in the sense of 'health',⁶ 'healing', 'cure' and 'remedy'.⁷ Similarly, the word רפאות means 'healing', 'medicine'.⁸ The term מרפא is used in both literal and metaphorical sense. The literal sense of 'health' is found in Jer 8:15. Metaphorically, health is used in the sense of peace of mind (Prov 12:18; 16:24). מרפא and רפאות could also mean 'health'.⁹

Another Hebrew word translated 'heal' is derived from ארך, which means 'to be long', 'to prolong', 'live long'. ארוכה and ארכה are translated 'healing', 'soundness', or 'health', to mean the prolongation of life, time and years or the fitness of the functions of the body.¹⁰

In ancient Near East, health was a highly prized possession. The Hebrews tended to think of health primarily in terms of physical strength and well-being. Whenever blessings were

³ Aitken, 'שמע', 177-78.

⁴ Stephen D. Renn, ed., *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 472.

⁵ Renn, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, 472-73.

⁶ In ancient Near East, health was a highly prized possession. The Hebrews tended to think of health primarily in terms of physical strength and well-being. Whenever blessings were invoked, length of days was invariably one of the benefits most frequently enjoined (Richard K. Harrison, 'Healing, Health', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. George A. Buttrick [Nashville: Abingdon, 1991], 541-42).

⁷ Aaron Pick, 'Health', in *Dictionary of Old Testament Words for English Readers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982), 191.

⁸ Alan Kam-Yau Chan and Thomas B. Song/Michael L. Brown, 'רפא', in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1162; H. J. Stoebe, 'רפא', in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 3:1255; William White, 'רפא', in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:857; William Wilson, 'Heal, Health', in *New Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1987), 210.

⁹ Pick, 'Health', 191.

¹⁰ See Wilson, 'Heal, Health', 210; Francis Brown, 'ארוכה', in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 74; Pick, 'Health', 191.

invoked, length of days was invariably one of the benefits most frequently enjoined.¹¹ The concept of health includes all areas of the individual's existence – body, mind and spirit (Ps 42:11). Forgiveness and cleansing from sin bring health and healing (Jer 30:12-17; 33:6-8).

Wisdom

In General

In the Old Testament, the most common technical term for 'wisdom' is the Hebrew word חָכְמָה. Generally, the term means 'masterful understanding', 'skill', 'expertise'. In biblical texts outside of Proverbs, חָכְמָה is used of technical and artistic skills (Exod 28:3; 31:6), of the magic arts (Exod 7:11; Isa 3:3), of government (Eccl 4:13; Jer 50:35), of diplomacy (1 Kgs 5:7[21]), and of war (Isa 10:13).

Von Rad, who sees wisdom as an empirical knowledge of order, defines wisdom as, 'practical knowledge of the law of life and of the world, based on experience'.¹² Criticising von Rad's definition as being so comprehensive that it is unusable, James Crenshaw defines wisdom as, 'The quest for self-understanding in terms of relationships with things, people, and the Creator'.¹³ Unlike von Rad, Roger Whybray does not assign the preoccupation with 'wisdom' to a distinct group of people.¹⁴ He prefers the term 'intellectual tradition' (pp. 7-14) to 'wisdom tradition' regarding this tradition as 'a set of ideas, or an attitude to life' (p. 72). Whybray makes a careful study of the vocabulary that has been traditionally associated with wisdom. The examination of the noun *hokmah* (wisdom) and the adjective *hakam* (wise) leads him to define wisdom as 'simply a natural endowment, which some persons possess in greater measure than others' (p. 6). However, quoting Prov 21:11, he believes that "wisdom" could also be acquired by those who did not originally possess it, provided that they did not belong to one of the categories of fools whose folly was incorrigible' (p. 6). Fox indicates that the word חָכְמָה is different from English 'wisdom'. For him, *wisdom* refers to 'the good sense to take the long view and judge things by moral as well as practical criteria and the sagacity to discern the best ends as well as the best means'.¹⁵ Fox adds that חָכְמָה includes other aspects of intelligence and knowledge, such as the craftsman's skill, the magician's arts, the statesman's savvy, the merchant's know-how, the sly person's wiles.¹⁶

Evidently every definition seeks to reveal the identity of the reality under consideration and distinguishes it from what it is not. According to Dianne Bergant, there is diversity in the definition of the wisdom that developed within ancient Israel as it is found in the Hebrew Scriptures. There are many definitions, each presenting a slightly different perspective.¹⁷ Perhaps Kathleen O'Connor is right when he says, 'Wisdom is a fluid, mercurial term, difficult

¹¹ Harrison, 'Healing, Health', 541-42.

¹² Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, trans. David Muir Gibson Stalke (London: SCM, 1975), 418. This definition provides the basis for his book *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972). One of the themes of this work is 'order', which is discerned within creation and within the social conventions of the community. The conviction is that a person's willingness and ability to discover this order and to live in harmony with it brings success in life. This wisdom is the product of human reflection on human experience.

¹³ James L. Crenshaw, 'Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature', *JBL* 88 (1969): 132.

¹⁴ Roger Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 15-54.

¹⁵ Michael V. Fox, 'Wisdom in Qoheleth', in *In Search of Wisdom*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Bernard B. Scott, William J. Wiseman (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 115-16.

¹⁶ Fox, 'Wisdom in Qoheleth', 116.

¹⁷ Dianne Bergant, *What are They Saying about Wisdom Literature?* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 3.

to pin down or to contain within set parameters'.¹⁸ This is because the Hebrew and Greek nouns for 'wisdom' refer to divergent realities: to a way of thinking, to a way of living, to a body of literature, to various technical or artistic skills, to a search for meaning and order, to sagacity about life and human relations, to reverent 'fear of the Lord', and to a woman, personified Wisdom herself.¹⁹

In Proverbs

The book of Proverb can be described as a 'book of wisdom'. However, as Fontaine notes, understanding the meaning of 'wisdom' in the book of Proverbs is not so simple a matter as one might expect, because the history of book is complicated.²⁰ The Hebrew word חֵכְמָה, translated 'wisdom' occurs thirty-nine times and the adjective חָכָם 'wise' forty-seven times in the book. These words are found in the various sections of the book.²¹

In Proverbs, the word חֵכְמָה is used in a number of different senses, though they all convey a similar meaning. It constantly refers to life-skill, which is the ability of a person to conduct their life in the best conceivable way and to the best result. There are two other words which are closely and frequently used with it that clarifies its varieties of meaning - תְּבוּנָה and בִּינָה which are translated 'understanding'²² and הִצְחָה which is translated 'knowledge'.²³ For Waltke, in Proverbs, חֵכְמָה mostly denotes the mastery over experience through the intellectual, emotional and spiritual state of knowing existentially the deed-destiny nexus (*a search for 'order'*), which enables its possessor to cope with enigma and adversity, to pull down strongholds, in order to promote the life of the individual and/or a community (Prov 21:22).²⁴

It is imperative to state that in Proverbs, חֵכְמָה does not refer to the Greek conception of wisdom as philosophical theory or rhetorical sophistry. Rather, as Waltke posits, in Proverbs, *wisdom* includes virtues such as, knowledge, insight, prudence, cunning, discretion, learning, guidance, counsel, understanding, competence, and resourcefulness (Prov 1:2, 25). In addition, in Proverbs, these virtues are exercised in the realms of righteousness, justice and equity and give wisdom a moral dimension as Prov 1:3 and 8:20 show. Furthermore, in Proverbs, wisdom has a religious dimension, because Proverbs' wisdom includes knowledge of God.²⁵ Proverbs describes wisdom as a relationship; it begins with the 'fear of the LORD' (Prov 1:7).²⁶ Finally, wisdom in Proverbs is specifically instructional wisdom, framed as from an instructor such as a parent to a junior such as a son or sons.²⁷ We need to note that while Whybray indicates that

¹⁸ Kathleen O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 23.

¹⁹ O'Connor, *Wisdom Literature*, 23.

²⁰ Carole R. Fontaine, 'Wisdom in Proverbs', in *In Search of Wisdom*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Bernard B. Scott, William J. Wiseman (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 99.

²¹ Roger Whybray, *Proverbs*, NCBC (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), 3.

²² Gerhard von Rad posits that in biblical scholarship, the term 'wisdom' of Israel is not designated by one single, invariable term in the Old Testament. He explains that חֵכְמָה has no precedence among תְּבוּנָה and בִּינָה and הִצְחָה. and shows that these words are closely connected with each other and in parallelism they become intertwined that they appear as synonyms and so difficult to understand (*Wisdom in Israel*, 53). For William McKane, תְּבוּנָה and בִּינָה 'are descriptive of the intellectual attitudes of the sages and their reliance on rational scrutiny, and so they are bad words and inimical to the fear of Yahweh' (*Proverbs*, OTL [London: SCM, 1970], 293).

²³ See *Wisdom in Israel*, 53; Whybray, *Proverbs*, 3-4.

²⁴ Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 913.

²⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 914.

²⁶ Tremper Longman III, 'Proverbs 1: Book Of', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2008), 539.

²⁷ Kenneth A. Kitchen, 'Proverbs 2: Ancient Near Eastern Background', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2008), 552.

חֶכְמָה is also paired with יִשְׁר 'honesty' (4:11) and the יְרֵאת יְהוָה 'the fear of YHWH' (9:10),²⁸ von Rad draws attention to מְזִמָּה 'plan', 'thought', 'prudence' and מוֹסֵר 'correction'.²⁹ Thus, 'Proverbs heaps up synonyms for cognitive powers and knowledge in an attempt to place them all ... under the aegis of wisdom'.³⁰

SEARCH FOR ORDER - THE WORLDVIEW IN WISDOM LITERATURE

A proper understanding of obedience as healing wisdom in the book of Proverbs begins by understanding the worldview of Wisdom literature – order and disorder - of which Proverbs is part. One feature of Wisdom literature is the search for order,³¹ the order that exists in nature and in human society. This order is discovered by experience, and it is expected that one should conform to it.³² A wise Israelite assumes that harmony reigns in and among the spheres of (1) nature, (2) human society and (3) the religious relationship between believers and their deity. These realms were thought to form an interrelated harmony, whose accord stemmed from the very activity of YHWH as Creator.

Therefore, we can say that the sages knew there was an order apparent in nature, which they incorporated into their wisdom. As von Rad aptly puts it:

Thus here, in proverbial wisdom, there is faith in the stability of the elementary relationships between man and man, faith in the similarity of men and of their reactions, faith in the reliability of the orders which support human life, and thus, implicitly or explicitly, faith in God who put these orders into position.³³

Dick intimates that the sages maintained that a wise person, first, successfully integrates him/herself into this created order, either at the natural universe level or in the sphere of human relationships; second, seeks to discover the continuity between the surrounding natural world and human activities; and third, knows of the evils and *disorders* that pervades their experiences of the world.³⁴ And so 'having wisdom means being in tune with the order which God has placed in creation and life', which 'leads to harmony, and therefore to success'.³⁵

WISDOM AND HEALTH/HEALING

In order to understand the reason wisdom was connected with healing and health, as shown in the book of Proverbs, we need to look at healing and the cultus in ancient Israel and how wisdom came to bridge the gap between cult-centred pre-exilic faith and the post-exilic faith of a Jewish diaspora.³⁶ Clements asserts that in early Israel, the diagnosis and treatment of disease were mainly the responsibility of the cultus. The priest, with the assistance of the prophet, diagnosed the causes of the problem and its probable outcome. It was assumed that (i)

²⁸ Whybray, *Proverbs*, 4.

²⁹ von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 53.

³⁰ Fox, 'Wisdom in Qoheleth', 117.

³¹ Roland E. Murphy suggests that the sages put order (order amid chaos) into varied experiences that confronted them. He maintains that it is not clear that they conceived of an order, a cosmos, outside of themselves as an object of search. For him, it is more appropriate to describe the goal of the sages as 'coping with life', not 'mastery of life' (*Wisdom Literature & Psalms* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1983], 29).

³² It seems this attitude was a basic part of Israel's world view, for Isaiah could indict Israel in terms of the breaking of an order implicit in the created world (Isa 1:3); similarly, Amos shows the disorderliness of Israel by pointing to an 'order' (Amos 6:12).

³³ von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 62-63.

³⁴ Michael B. Dick, *Reading the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 280-81.

³⁵ James A. Loader, 'Proverbs', in *Dialogue with God*, ed. Jasper J. Burden and Wilem S. Prinsloo (Cape Town, SA: Tafelberg, 1987), 43.

³⁶ On 'wisdom and cult', see von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 186-189.

sickness came from God (so, e.g., Exod 15:25-26), (ii) healing comes only from God (e.g., Isaiah 38)³⁷ and (iii) disease was bound up with experiences of sin and guilt (Ps 38:3-8). It is important to note that illness was uncleanness which could be only countered by holiness (Lev 15:31). In ancient Israel, therefore, health had connection with the regulations and activities of worship. Notwithstanding, they recognised the healing power of certain herbs (Ezek 47:9, 12).³⁸

The 598 and 587 BCE catastrophes of Israel led many Judahites in exile, where they had no access to the cult for sanctifying and restorative power. As a result, wisdom came to develop a wide-ranging concern with the ideas of health and healing as a part of the wise order of life which God had created for his creatures.³⁹ Thus, as Clements notes, a non-cultic approach to the problems of sickness and healing came to be developed which no longer carried the stigma of 'disloyalty' which was still capable of being levelled against king Asa by the Chronicler (2 Chr 16:11). Medicine came to be viewed as part of the science of 'life', available to all those who feared the Lord. Similarly, the pharmacist, with his knowledge of healing plants and herbs, needed no longer to be a Levite. It was a distinct ministry, which like the medical practitioner, was a gift of God.⁴⁰

'THE FEAR OF THE LORD' AS OBEDIENCE

'The fear of the LORD' (יִרְאָה יְהוָה) is a concept that is central to the biblical wisdom literature, and especially to the book of Proverbs. This idea is clearly revealed from its position: it is the motto at the beginning (1:7) and unites with 9:10 to form a frame for the collection in chs 1-9. In addition, it provides a frame for the whole book, as a connection between 1:7 and 31:30 demonstrates. As Atkinson notes, 'It is a theme which underlies all Wisdom's values'.⁴¹

According to Toy, the word *fear* is traced to the dread which was felt in the presence of the powerful and stern tribal or national deity. He explains that Semitic deities were believed to be lords and kings, who exercised constant control over their subjects and inflicted punishment on those who disobey them. Toy, therefore, indicates that this was the attitude of the pious man toward God in the Old Testament. He, however, explains that the mere dread of the divine anger advanced to that of reverence for the divine law.⁴² As a result, he adds,

'the OT ethical conception of life is not love for a moral ideal as the supreme good, but regard for it is an ordination of the supreme authority; the world is looked on not as a household in which God and man are co-workers, but as a realm in which God is king and man is subject. This conception, the result of the moral strenuousness of the Jewish people and of their Oriental governmental scheme of life, helped to develop moral strictness. It is a fundamental principle of moral life....'⁴³

Fear simply means 'reverence',⁴⁴ and understood as 'reverent obedience'.⁴⁵ As Toy notes, 'the idea of the Hebrew sage is that he who lives with reverent acknowledgement of God as

³⁷ Note that Hezekiah's response to illness - seeking healing from YHWH - was shown to be a major indication of his piety and faithfulness to YHWH.

³⁸ Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom for a Changing World* (Berkeley, CA: Bibal, 1990), 41-42.

³⁹ Clements, *Wisdom for a Changing World*, 55.

⁴⁰ Clements, *Wisdom for a Changing World*, 55.

⁴¹ David Atkinson, *Message of Proverbs*, BST (Leicester, England: IVP, 1996), 101.

⁴² Crawford H. Toy, *The Book of Proverbs*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1977), 10.

⁴³ Toy, *Book of Proverbs*, 10.

⁴⁴ John Phillips, *Proverbs*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 26.

⁴⁵ David A. Hubbard, *Proverbs*, The Communicator's Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 48.

lawgiver will have within his soul a permanent and efficient moral guide'.⁴⁶ Whybray writes that 'fear of God' refers 'to a standard of moral conduct known and accepted by men in general'.⁴⁷ According to Waltke, 'fear of God' stimulates people to right behaviour even when a state does not impose moral sanctions.⁴⁸

Reverent obedience (fear) is understood as a straight walk (Prov 14:2), a humble ear (Prov 15:33), a tender heart (Prov 28:14), and a cleansed life (Prov 16:6). So, the phrase, 'the fear of God, means 'reverent obedience to YHWH'. The fear of the LORD is not understood as a fleeting emotion or a passing notion but as a habit, uprightness. As Atkinson shows, it is not an imprisoning fear, which is the consequence of sin (cf. Gen 3:10), but 'an appropriate response to the authority and enabling power of God'.⁴⁹ The biblical reader realises that this notion is typical of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic writings and is connected with 'walking in the Lord's ways' and 'hearkening to the commandments' of his Law. These phrases are 'added to wisdom literature in order to link it to the Law and the Prophets'.⁵⁰

The 'fear of the LORD' is combined with the ethical maxim 'turn away from evil' as in Prov 3:7, 8:13 and 16:6. These are two sides of the same coin. Nel discusses the combination of the ethical and the cultic. The ethical 'fear' denotes a prior relationship with God, while the cultic 'fear' denotes obedience to the Torah and the religious cult.⁵¹ The 'fear of the LORD' is the milieu or sphere within which true wisdom is attainable. Therefore, wisdom does not connote the acquisition of cognitive knowledge but rather is lived as an ethical concept. It comes from 'listening' to the Lord and obeying his precepts (Prov 1:5, 8; 2:2).⁵² Ross is right to indicate that 'the fear of the LORD is manifested in a life of obedience, confessing and forsaking sin (28:18), and doing what is right (21:3), which is the believer's task before God (17:3)' and adds that 'since the motivation for faith and obedience comes from the Scripture, Proverbs relates the way of wisdom to the law (28:4; 29:18)'.⁵³ As Toy notes, the 'fear of God', which is assumed to be the true wisdom, is defined as turning away from sin/evil; it implies that the 'fear of God' gives the proper ethical norm of life.⁵⁴ The phrase refers to an attitude of respect and loyalty towards the LORD and the LORD's intentions.⁵⁵

The Book of Proverbs provides benefits of fearing God/obeying God. It is the beginning of knowledge (1:7, 29; 2:5) and wisdom (9:10; 15:33). In addition, it instils confidence (14:26) and makes rich (22:4). Moreover, it enables one to 'hate or avoid evil' (Prov 8:13; 16:6; 23:17).⁵⁶ Furthermore, it can be valued for its worth (15:16), satisfaction (19:23), safety (29:25; 14:26) and its vitality (10:27; 14:27; 22:4). Most importantly, it prolongs life (10:27), it is a fountain of life (14:27), leads to life (19:23) and is rewarded with life (22:4).

⁴⁶ Toy, *Book of Proverbs*, 10.

⁴⁷ Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 96.

⁴⁸ Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 903.

⁴⁹ Atkinson, *Message of Proverbs*, 101.

⁵⁰ Paul N. Tarazi, *The Old Testament Introduction*, vol. 3: *Psalms & Wisdom* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 130.

⁵¹ Philip S. Nel, *The Structure and Ethos of the Wisdom Admonitions in Proverbs* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 97-101.

⁵² Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, rev. exp. (Downers, IL: IVP, 2006), 245.

⁵³ Allen P. Ross, 'Proverbs', in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 890.

⁵⁴ Toy, *Proverbs*, 61.

⁵⁵ Kathleen A. Farmer, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, ITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Edinburgh: The Handsel, 1991), 131.

⁵⁶ See Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 257 and John A. Kitchen, *Proverbs*, A Mentor Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2006), 41.

WISDOM AS THE PATH OF LIFE

In ancient Near East, there is a dualism between life and death. These concepts are central to the people's cultic ideas and rites. For instance, in Canaanite religion, Mot was the god of death who serves as the chief opponent of Baal, the god who gives life. However, the wisdom tradition displays different ideas about life and death. It de-mythologises death. Israel's wisdom teaches that adherence to wisdom is the path to life, while rejection of wisdom is the way of death (see, e.g., 3:1-2, 18; 12:28).

Wisdom is a fountain of life that helps one to avoid the snares of death (13:14). While the pursuit of immortality leads to death (e.g., 1:32; 2:18; 5:5), wisdom holds the key to well-being and long life (3:15-18). Wisdom leads to blessing, protection and long life. A person who keeps the commandment keeps his/her life (19:16); 'the wage of the righteous leads to life' (10:16), guarding the way 'preserves' life (16:17), those who 'heed instruction' are 'on the path of life' (10:17), and 'the reward for humility and fear of God is . . . life' (22:4). One who is 'steadfast in righteousness will live', but one who 'pursues evil will die' (11:19), as will one who 'despises the word' (19:16; 13:13). Death has 'snares' but they can be avoided through the teachings of the wise and through the fear of the LORD (13:14; 14:27). Fools, however, 'die for lack of sense' (10:21). The 'way of error leads to death' (12:28), but 'righteousness delivers from death' (10:2; 11:4).

The word 'life' could be used as a figure of speech referring to quality and quantity of life rather than to mere physical existence. 'Life' is used in proverbial statements to mean 'a long and blessed life' and that 'death' refers to an early demise, dying before one's time. Since most OT witnesses concerning the concepts of immortality or everlasting life is silent, there is a high degree of probability that statements such as those about avoiding 'the snares of death' (14:27; 16:22) meant simply avoiding a premature or tragic death rather than an escape from mortality itself.

Wisdom is a tree of life to those who embrace her (3:18). Obedience to wisdom's teachings and commands prolongs life many years (3:1-2), because long life is in wisdom's right hand (3:16a). Obedience to a father's instruction and teaching helps one to live (4:1-4).

OBEDIENCE AS HEALING WISDOM IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

As shown above, the Book of Proverbs preaches that adherence to wisdom can promote a long life. This is true of the life of a person who 'fears that LORD'. In other words, obedience to God brings healing and health. Thus healing or health is one of the benefits of obedience to God. Some few texts will be collected to explain obedience to God as healing wisdom in the Book of Proverbs.

Prov 3:7-8

⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord and shun evil.

⁸This will bring *health* [רְפָאוֹת] to your body
and nourishment to your bones. (NIV)

⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.

⁸It will be a *healing* [רְפָאוֹת] for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body. (NRSV)

Proverbs 3:1–12 is an exhortation from Solomon to his son, urging him to heed his teaching and trust wholeheartedly in the Lord. He cites some of the valuable results of obedience and trust. This section builds on the counsel Solomon gave in Proverbs 2. The following section describes the blessings that come to those who find wisdom and understanding.

Verse 7a is within the context of trusting God with all your heart (v. 5). Thus, choices, decisions, motives, intentions must all be directed to what God wants and what God can do. To trust God is to bet your life on God's truth and wisdom. Trusting God goes with three renunciations, first, of our own understanding (v. 5), not tempered and not molded by the will and guidance of God. Second, of our own wisdom in which it is so easy and so foolish to take pride (v. 7); third, of evil in its many headed manifestations, but especially, in this context, in its most dangerous form – arrogance self-reliance from which all fear of God is drained (v. 7).

In v. 7b, avoidance of evil is joined to the fear of the LORD. As Murphy notes, it is only here and in 24:21 that the imperative is used.⁵⁷ Verse 8 provides the benefit of true wisdom, which comes from the fear of the LORD, which in turn leads to obedience - physical health and vigour.⁵⁸ McKane suggests the meaning 'health' for רִפְיָא and 'medicine'.⁵⁹ The health is for the bones and flesh. The terms *bones* and *flesh* are used here as 'synecdoche', a figure of speech in which the part is substituted for the whole. It is used here to describe not only the structure and tissue of the human body, but the whole human self, body-spirit, tangible-intangible.⁶⁰ Hubbard explains that 'health is a wholistic not just a physical word; it connotes thriving and radiant wellness' and indicates that 'for Proverbs, health or healing is a code word for the total personal prosperity that is God's gift to those who walk in wisdom's way'.⁶¹ As Atkinson shows, 'spiritual, moral, and physical aspects of health are brought together' in this text.⁶²

The reward of obedience is healing (deliverance from disease) and refreshment. Toy is right to state that 'the sense of the verse is that obedience to the law of God secures for a person a thoroughly healthy and happy condition of being. The happiness is primarily freedom from bodily and other outward ills, but necessarily involves inward peace'.⁶³

Prov 4:20-22

- ²⁰My child, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
²¹Do not let them escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
²²For they are life to those who find them,
and *healing* [רִפְיָא] to all their flesh. (Prov 4:20-22 NRSV)

In this text, the healing/health of the whole body/flesh is said to depend on the diligent application of ears, eyes, and heart to the task of learning what the teacher has to teach, which leads to obedience. The Hebrew word *leb/lebab* (translated 'heart') 'is the central organ of the

⁵⁷ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 21.

⁵⁸ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 21.

⁵⁹ McKane, *Proverbs*, 293.

⁶⁰ David A. Hubbard, *Proverbs*, The Communicator's Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 71.

⁶¹ Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 71-72.

⁶² Atkinson, *Message of Proverbs*, 127.

⁶³ Toy, *Proverbs*, 61-62

body in the wisdom literature'.⁶⁴ It can also be translated 'mind' because its range of meaning in Hebrew includes concepts we often associate with the word 'mind' in English.⁶⁵ The 'heart/mind' represents the place within the human body where both rational and emotional decisions are made.⁶⁶

'Life' in v. 22, as in 2:21; 3:2, 22 and 4:13, refers to long life or preservation of life, which comprehends all outward earthly blessing. It clearly includes physical health or well-being.⁶⁷ If the teacher's words are in the heart, they are life and healing, and so it is important to guard the heart, because it is the source of the surges of life.⁶⁸ Health (or healing) involves deliverance from the evils of life as in 3:8. 'Flesh' (בָּשָׂר) is sometimes interpreted here to mean 'the whole being' (so REB). However, the claim that 'length of days and years of life' would be conferred on those who listen to the words of the teacher (3:2) indicates that the meaning of 'flesh' as 'body' would not be inappropriate.⁶⁹ So, as Toy indicates, it could refer to as 'being' and that the terms flesh, heart and soul often refer to 'self'.⁷⁰ 'Healing' here probably simply means 'health' (cf. 16:24).⁷¹ Obedience to good teachings preserves the soul and body for keeping instructions provides true guidance on the way of life.⁷² Walking in wisdom (obeying the teacher's instruction of God's way) benefits every aspect of a person's life – physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological.⁷³ As Proverbs 4:23-27 shows, this holistic health demands that our 'whole body' be dedicated to God and kept in obedience for him.

Prov 29:1

On the other hand, disobedience does not bring healing.

He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck,
will suddenly be broken beyond *healing* [מִרְפָּא]. (Prov 29:1)

Kitchen describes 'stiffens the neck' as 'an ineducable spirit, a wilful self-sufficiency, and a resolute rebellion'.⁷⁴ The phrase is often translated as 'obstinate' (Exod 32:9; 33:3 and 5; 34:9) or 'stubborn' (Deut 9:6 and 13). The opposite, Toy posits, is 'bending the neck, in token of submission'.⁷⁵ It is a biblical Hebrew expression 'for stubbornness in the sense of refusing to accept teaching or rebuke';⁷⁶ such a person persists in sin and in self-delusion sets himself in opposition to what can save him.⁷⁷ The term 'suddenly' could refer to the law of divine intervention; possibly it indicates that the person who is secured in his obstinacy does not foresee misfortune.⁷⁸ The text teaches that when God reproveth, he does so for the purpose of calling us away from death back into life. A wise life is marked by obedience. Solomon tells his student what the results will be if the student trusts in the Lord wholeheartedly,

⁶⁴ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 28.

⁶⁵ Farmer, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, 40 and Murphy, *Proverbs*, 28.

⁶⁶ Farmer, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, 40.

⁶⁷ Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 908.

⁶⁸ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 28.

⁶⁹ Whybray, *Proverbs*, 82.

⁷⁰ Toy, *Proverbs*, 97.

⁷¹ Whybray, *Proverbs*, 82.

⁷² Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 6 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 82.

⁷³ Kitchen, *Proverbs*, 112.

⁷⁴ Kitchen, *Proverbs*, 651.

⁷⁵ Toy, *Proverbs*, 507.

⁷⁶ Whybray, *Proverbs*, 398.

⁷⁷ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 425.

⁷⁸ Toy, *Proverbs*, 507.

acknowledges the Lord in everything, fears the Lord, and turns his back on evil. Good health and refreshing are the normal results of a good relationship with the Lord.⁷⁹

Sin, which is disobedience to God's instructions, affects the health of the body. David has an experience to share:

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Ps 32:3-5)

As Kraus shows, 'the guilt that is retained in humans and passed over in silence has a deleterious effect on physical well-being'. The text shows a secret relation of guilt and illness. When one is in silence and not open toward God, his body wastes away. God's wrath brings distress on the sinner. Failure to confess guilt results in 'psychic convulsions and devastations'. Psychologically, guilt disturbs one's life from deep within and displays itself in the processes of physical illness. Nonetheless, confession of guilt brings consolation and forgiveness. 'The rescue of forgiveness is the source of healing'.⁸⁰ Wisdom enables the obedient to avoid the disastrous effects of foolishness and sin, with the benefits being real and lasting.

We conclude this section with these texts.

The fear of the LORD prolongs days,
but the years of the wicked will be shortened. (10:27)

The antithetical parallelism here is that the opposite of God-fearer is being *wicked*. The difference between the two ways of life is great that it affects the length of life. To live in utter disregard of God and in basic violation of his will is so to disrupt the normal flow of things that health itself may well be jeopardised. Stress, anxiety, conflict, dissipation all take their toll on human vitality and longevity. And where violence is a life habit the risks are even greater.

This principle is stated in a mixed metaphor:

The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life,
to turn one away from the snares of death. (14:27)

Death is the persistent hunter, trailing the unwary and silently coaxing them to make decisions that will catch them in his snares – decisions about companionship, work, relaxation, diet, personal habits that violate God's will. The fear of God, like a ceaseless fountain provides both refreshment and persistence to enable us to quell death's plot.

⁷⁹ Exodus 15:22–25 describes a situation in which the Israelites were desperate for water. They grumbled when they found water at Marah, but could not drink it because it was bitter. However, the Lord cured the water and promised, 'If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer' (Exod 15:26).

⁸⁰ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 369-70.

The positive value of biblical obedience is summed up simply in these synthetic lines:

By humility and fear of the LORD
are riches and honour and life. (22:4)

The fear of the LORD prolongs life
but the life of the wicked will be shortened. (10:27)

Life is used here to refer to longevity, preservation from illness or misfortune that would shorten the days of the wicked as 10:27 shows: long life, a supreme blessing when there is no hope beyond the grave, is the reward of obedience to God.

CONCLUSION

The book of Proverbs clearly shows that obedience to God gives wisdom which offers health and healing to the human body. The study has shown there are physical consequences to sin, and there are physical benefits to obedience. This is not a *guarantee* of good health or healing. For our context, it is perhaps best to say that as we obey God's instruction and so refrain from sin, we are protected from the physical problems which come through sin;⁸¹ in other words, the more we obey God and walk in his ways, the *less likely* we are to encounter physical problems. Following God's commands makes one less likely to experience the diseases, accidents, and consequences which often befall those who lead a decadent life. The force of the verses we looked at is clear; godly living is a key to healing and health.

⁸¹ In Pss 32:2 and 51:8, David expressed the effects of sin upon his body.

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