

Some notes on the biblical concept of “discipline” or “correction”¹

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The basic terms. What in our English Bibles is usually translated “discipline” or “correction” —in its verbal form “to discipline, instruct, correct”— comes from a Hebrew root “*wsr*, whose basic meaning cannot be determined.”² What we do know is that the Hebrew verb *yasar*, and its noun *musar*, are very important and common in the Bible. To a lesser extent we find the Greek equivalents, *paideia* (noun) and *paidein* (verb), which are the Septuagint (LXX) translation of the corresponding Hebrew terms, in the New Testament (NT). The most important passage which uses the noun is Heb 12:5-13; see also Eph 6:4; 2 Tim 3:16. Passages which use a verbal form relevant here are: 1 Cor 11:32; 2 Tim 2:25; Rev 3:19.

Meanings of the root. If indeed the “basic meaning” of the *root*, that is, its original etymology, is unknown, we well know its meaning and connotations in the Bible and in rabbinic Judaism (I shall not discuss the extrabiblical significance of the Greek *paideia*, whence comes “pedagogue,” the slave who led the child to school, used in this sense in Gal 3:24). The basic meaning of the verb is “to punish,” or “chastise,” using a Latin root which means “to correct, reprove, chastise, amend, restrain, hold in.”³ The punishment may be corporal, as in Prov 29:19; Deut 22:18, and as it is said Pilate did with Jesus (or rather, according to Lucan sensitivity, as he proposed to do to Jesus, Greek text of Luke 23:16, 22). In English we have the famous proverb “spare the rod and spoil the child,” taken from Prov 13:24. But the “punishment” can be verbal; both rod and word were seen as necessary for the education of children; hence at times the translation “correction, instruction” (this latter word, akin to teaching, I would leave for the root from which “torah” comes, a word meaning “teaching, instruction or doctrine, especially from priests;” it is the LXX who translate *nómos*, “law,” and this is how it is used in the NT).

¹ This is the author’s translation, with some adaptations, from the original Spanish, which will be published in 2008 in *AnáMnesis*, the theological journal of the Mexican Dominicans. It is dedicated to my dear friend and spiritual guide Ms. Fiorella De Ferrari.

² *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament. Volume 2* (E. Jenni – C. Westermann, eds.; ET M.E. Biddle; Peabody: Hendrikson, 1997), 548, article by M. Sæbø. Without being limited to this article, what I am writing here depends largely on it.

³ *Langenscheidt’s Shorter Latin Dictionary* (S.A. Handford – Mary Herberg; Berlin – Munich, 1955, 1966), 62.

There is even an intensive form of this sense: Job 40:2. This verse presents problems of textual criticism and interpretation, but the Hebrew text (thus followed by the Vulgate) says “shall the ‘faultfinder’ (*yissor*) argue with Šadday.” That is, God is telling Job that Job is a “faultfinder” in regards to God, finding too many defects. Job in fact has bitterly complained against God. In Job 7:16-19, Job reverses (or “rereads”) what is said in Pss 8 and 144, where it was marveled that the Most High could have regard for humans. Now Job complains that God does not take His reproving eyes off of him, a mere mortal whom God does not even let swallow his saliva. This is the abusive sense of “correction” against which Eph 6:4 and Col 3:21 cautions us.

Subject, object and result of “correction.” The subjects who operate this “correction” are parents and teachers of wisdom, also the king and other rulers (see 1 Kgs 12:11, 14). But what may interest us more is God as subject. In Deut 4:36, God “disciplined” (*Bible de Jérusalem [BJ]* “instructed”) Israel in the midst of the fire, what is not lacking in symbolic significance. But the most beautiful and important passage in this deuteronomic context is Deut 8:1-6. Scholars such as the great Norbert Lohfink tell us that Deut 8 is one of the late sections in Deut, where Israel’s experience in the wilderness is “re-read” or re-thought, arriving in Deut 9:4-6, at an anticipation of the Pauline doctrine of justification by grace not works. As it was understood prior to Deut 8, rebellious Israel had put Yahweh to the test, complaining about the hardships of the exodus through the desert, and Yahweh had nourished him wonderfully with manna, quails, etc. The famous episode of Massa and Meriba (Exod 17:7; Deut 33:8) in fact refers to the “putting to the test,” in Latin *temptatio* (Massa), and to the “dispute” (Meriba). Now in Deut 8 this is reread (or “updated”);⁴ it was *Yahweh* who tested (“tempted”) Israel, humiliating him (Deut 8:2-3) in order to know what was in his heart. This is akin to what a man (a father) does with his son, that is, discipline or correct him (we thus find our verb here both in the Hebrew and in the Greek texts).

We recall that Jesus, the Son of God, passed through this trial, too, Mark 1:13, and since he did understand what Israel in the desert had not, he can reply to the tempter (Matt 4:3) with the famous words of Deut 8:3 (“man does not live by bread alone . . .”).

⁴ That is, the reproofs which had been necessary in one stage of Israel’s history, especially at the beginning of its Babylonian exile, had to be recycled and reinterpreted in an encouraging manner; the past is rescued, salvaged as corresponding all along to God’s design. We have a classic example in Gen 45:5-8; 50:20.

It is in Deut 8 that we find a striking description of what the “desert” was —and is still— for all who cross it. It is described in Deut 8:15 as “the great and terrible desert of fiery serpent and scorpion and thirsty land where there is no water.” It is because of these “fiery serpents” (whence “seraphim,” as in Isa 6:2, 6) that Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the desert, Num 21:6-9, typologically symbolizing what Christ fulfills, according to John 3:14-16.

This brings us to the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Like the Johannine Christ, the Servant shall be “lifted up and glorified,” according to the LXX in Isa 52:13 (the first verse of the fourth “song of the Suffering Servant”). It is well known that when his “hour” comes, in John’s Gospel, Jesus shall be “glorified;” see, e.g., John 12:23; 17:1. Isaiah himself had seen his glory and spoken about him, John 12:41. What is not as well known is that in Aramaic, Jesus’ tongue (but not in Hebrew or Greek), to be “lifted up” has the double meaning “be exalted” and “be crucified.”⁵ We have an example of this second sense in the Aramaic passage Ezra 6:11. But the way to glory for Jesus, and for the Servant (see Acts 3:13) is by way of “correction.”

Thus we find it in Isa 53:5, which says that “the correction (or punishment, *musar*) of our peace (*shalom*, here meaning ‘salvation’) [fell, was placed} upon him”: “Yahweh made fall on (or upon) him the iniquity of us all.”⁶ So that the correction we deserved was assumed by Jesus (or he removed it from us; this is the sense of Matt 8:17, regarding the “infirmities” of Isa 53:4, and of John 1:29, regarding the “sin of the world”).⁷ Heb 5:8 tells us that Jesus, “though being Son, learned obedience through what

⁵ See Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts. Third Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1946, 1954², 1967³), 141.

⁶ Two linguistic observations: 1) the verb “made to fall,” in Hebrew *paga* ‘, also means (in this Hiphil form) “intercede,” and it is thus used in Isa 53:12. 2) “Iniquity,” in Hebrew ‘*awon*, according to John L. McKenzie, “Aspects of Old Testament Thought,” in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1990), 1305, means “a twisted or distorted condition: one who sins is crooked or deformed . . . it designates the permanent damage that is done to the person by the sinful act.” See also *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament. Volume 2*, 862-864, which gives the term the primary meaning of “perverse” (from the Latin “turned the wrong way”). I have applied this sense to the Servant’s deformity according to Isa 53:2-3. Cf. Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:21. The Epistle of Barnabas, chap. 7, likens Christ to the scapegoat of Lev 16, and says that he will thus be recognized by the Jews when he returns; cf. Heb 13:13; Lev 16:20-22, 27.

⁷ In fact, the Hebrew verb “lift up, carry,” applied to sin in Isa 53:4, 12, has the cultic meaning “to expiate, remove sin;” thus, e.g., in Lev 16:22 (*BJ* “carry”). So that this other verb (as with the Aramaic verb “to lift” which we saw, but which is a different verb) also has a double meaning: the Servant shall be “lifted up,” Isa 52:13 (thus *BJ*), which also indicates his status as messianic “prince,” Ezek 34:24; 37:24-25 (“prince” here literally is one who is “lifted up”). Cf. Phil 2:9; John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32.

he suffered.” This sounds a lot like the Servant’s *musar*, which brought us the peace of salvation of Isa 53:5. And since Jesus was Son, he could not be exempt from what Heb 12:5-11 says, using the Greek verb *paidein*, which we have seen corresponds (in the LXX translation) to the Hebrew *yasar*, and the noun *paideia*, the Hebrew *musar*. This is related with suffering as testing (assaying) or refining of the righteous one in passages like Wis 3:4-6 (v. 5 uses both *paidein* and *peirazein*, “put to the test, tempt”). It is from this part of the Book of Wisdom that Matthew cites in 27:39-44 (see Wis 2:13-20), when Jesus on the cross is mocked.⁸

This brings us to the resurrection, by way of a beautiful psalm, 16. Luke cites it in Acts 22-28, prolonging it until 2:34.⁹ This psalm of contentment only in God, of rejection of idols and trust in one’s lot even after death, does not leave our verb *yasar* to the side. V. 7 says literally “I bless Yahweh who counsels me, even (in) the nights my kidneys correct me.”¹⁰ “The reins” are ‘the person’s most secret part’.¹¹ Could it not be that it was there, and through that part, that Christ was “perfected,” according to Heb 2:10; 5:9, and where we are perfected, 10:14; 11:40 (together with our Hebrew forebears), 12:23?

Integration. We once again take up some observations from Magne Sæbø’s article.¹² He indicates that *musar* (“punishment, correction”) at times means not the act of punishing, but its effect, that is, “discipline.”¹³ Verbs placed in parallelism with *yasar*

⁸ The phrase “son of God” in Greek (the language in which Wis is written) is *pais kyriou*, which can be translated “servant of the Lord (or of Yahweh). In fact, the LXX translates the Hebrew ‘*ebed* (“servant or slave”) with *pais*; thus in Isa 42:1; 49:6; 52:13 (although the LXX makes significant changes to what the Hebrew text says, that is, more than a translation, in many places it is more of an interpretation, an updating or rereading. Interestingly, the only place where the Hebrew says “servant of Yahweh,” Isa 42:19, here the LXX translate *the servants* (*douloi*, instead of *pais* or its plural *paides*). Luke in Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30 uses *pais* (which also means “child” and “youth”).

⁹ That is, Luke omits the conclusion of Psa 16 (“eternal joy at your right”) in Acts 2:28, in order to place it in 2:34 (to indicate Jesus’ enthronement at the Father’s, according to Psa 110).

¹⁰ This literal translation was indicated to me by the great Luis Alonso Schökel, in one of his last lectures during Advent of 1997, at the Gregorian University. Job’s fourth interlocutor de Job, Elihu, in Job 33:19, refers to pains in the night, when one is in bed, especially in the “bones,” as the “censure, punishment” (Hebrew verb *yakah*) of Yahweh who teaches, in order to make the person better and finally save him, 33:14-30. See Job 36, esp. v. 15 (the Talmud quotes God as saying ‘by thy wounds I will heal thee’). Cf. Jer 30:11; 46:28.

¹¹ *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. Study Edition. Volume One* ⚡ — ⚡ (L. Koehler – W. Baumgartner; Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill, 2001), 479. The “bones” (see note 10 above) can also have a role similar to that of the “heart” and “kidneys,” Jer 20:9; 23:9; Psa 35:10; 51:10 etc.

¹² *Theological Lexicon, vol. 2*, 549-550.

¹³ One should here note that “discipline,” like “disciple,” comes from the Latin verb *disco*, “to learn.” Thus it is with its Hebrew equivalent, the verb *lamad*, whence *limmud* or *talmid* (“disciple”) and *Talmud* (“learning”). In Matt, one “makes himself disciple” for the Kingdom, as in Matt 13:52.

(“to correct, punish”) are “to teach,” “rebuke” and “make turn,” that is, “convert,” the great Hebrew verb *šub* (see Jer 5:3; 31:18).¹⁴ The most important synonym of *musar* in Proverbs (where we saw that *musar* figures prominently) is *tokah̄at*, “rebuke, warning, reproof” (Prov 3:11; 5:12; 12:1; 15:32, to cite only a few passages). The verb “to listen” is particularly associated with *musar* (Prov 1:8; 4:1, etc.). Also the verb “to accept, receive” (Prov 19:20); this verb, whence comes *kabbalah* (“reception,” in Hebrew), is the counterpart to “transmit, deliver,” whence comes “tradition” (and “Masora, Masoretic” in Hebrew).¹⁵

Musar (“chastisement”) “removes ‘folly’ in the young man (Prov 22:15; cf., however, 19:27) and ‘makes wise’, so that in terms of its effect *mûsâr* becomes an alternative for ‘wisdom’ and ‘insight’ (Prov 1:2f.; 8:33; 15:32f. . . . , which should not be seen in merely intellectual terms but in the framework of a religiously grounded concept of life” (von Rad). *Musar* is a way of life, Prov 6:23. It gives life and brings honor and joy.¹⁶

The religious character of *musar* is related to the “fear of Yahweh” and to humility (Prov 15:33). Sæbø concludes that *musar* “is of the nature of an order theology: it refers primarily to integration in God’s order of life.”¹⁷

Final comments. In Christian tradition, and especially in the mystics, the concept of purification is crucial, as regards both active purifications (those we seek in our ascesis) and passive ones (which we *suffer, bear* or *sup-port*, as *patients*), and dark nights (St. John of the Cross). In the Bible too there is mention of purification: there is no “being-perfected” nor glory without it.¹⁸ Thus it is in Dan 11:35; 12:10. What is often

¹⁴ A very beautiful verse is that of Psa 94:12: “Happy the ‘man’ whom Yah corrects, and teaches from his Torah.” “Happy,” as in the first word of the first psalm, and in the beatitudes; ‘man’ (in Spanish, *varón* conveys the sense better), in Hebrew *geber*, the strong man, combat-capable; “Yah,” poetic shortening of Yahweh, as in *Hallelu-yah*; “from his Torah” is similar to “from his ways” in Isa 2:3; Mic 4:2.

¹⁵ See its Greek usage in 1 Cor 11:23; 15:3.

¹⁶ *Theological Lexicon, vol. 2, 550.*

¹⁷ *Theological Lexicon, vol. 2, 551.*

¹⁸ Jesus’ “perfection” in Heb 5:9 has been seen by some scholars as indicating his “priestly ordination,” according to the LXX expression in Exod 29:9, “and you shall perfect (o “complete”) Aaron’s hands,” translating the Hebrew expression “fill the hands.” See also Lev 4:5; 8:33; 16:32; 21:10. We are a priestly people who offers spiritual sacrifices, 1 Pet 2:5, in effect, our own life; see Heb 7:27; 10:5-10; Rom 12:1-2; Phil 2:17; 2 Tim 4:6. “Perfection” in Matt 5:48 is clearly that of the “integral” person (in Hebrew, *tam* or *tamim*, a person of one piece, simple, not divided or duplicitous), as was Noah (Gen 6:9), Abraham (cf. Gen 17:1) and Job (Job 1:8), etc., with Lev 20:26 in the background. On the expression “crown of glory,” see 1 Cor 9:24-27.

translated as “prune” in John 15 in Greek is simply “cleanse, purify” (*katharizein*, whence catharsis). Purification can be with mere water, as John’s baptism was (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16), but definitive and complete purification had to be with fire. Jesus himself anticipated this type of purification, Luke 12:49-50, and applied it to his disciples, Mark 9:49. This purification is the work of the Holy Spirit, who thus accomplished it on Pentecost, Acts 2:3-4; cf. 15:8-9; it is the eschatological conversion of Deut 30:6, which confers the new heart, and which is not human surgery, Col 2:11: it is the “circumcision of Christ,” in whose blood we have washed our garments, Rev 7:14 (cf. Dan 11:35; Gen 49:9-11), after the “great tribulation.” This is how true worship of God takes place, following the Lamb.