MAKING SPACE FOR STRONG WOMEN:

A SOCIO-NARRATOLOGICAL READING OF PROVERBS 31

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ABSTRACT

Two strong women inhabit Proverbs 31: a mother, unseen, speaks bold words (vv. 1-9), and a wife, unheard, conquers through aggressive action (vv. 10-31). Questions posed within the text – *"What, my son?!" ... "A strong woman, who can find?"* – invite still more questions: Who are these women? What prompts these exclamations? Both women jockey with familial counterparts for influence over societal structures, behaviors, and values. Amid such tensions, are these women supporting or contesting each other? Presuming communal purpose in the stories projected in these lines, how do these women, as subjects and objects, create space for communal reflection and debate concerning issues of survival? What territories are protected, what boundaries transgressed via their words and actions?

Using feminist hermeneutics, space theory, and Bakhtinian criticism, this study seeks to answer these questions. When read via socio-narratological lens, Proverbs 31 forms an event of intervention for the Persian-era Yehudite community negotiating its identity when living under empire, where tensions abound between wealthy urban and impoverished rural inhabitants. This study clarifies how gender constructions and power dynamics within the text promote an elite ideology even as its gaps, ambiguities, and contradictions enable marginalized sectors to resist the damage of such ideology. The socio-narratological lens also enables diverse uses of lived spaces to appear alongside the projected hegemonic ideals of conceived spaces.

Such discoveries contribute to a better understanding of this ancient community processing its context of cooperating with empire in an economic system that benefitted some but exploited others. Expanding options for meaning and recognizing multiple voices within the text liberates marginalized people to see themselves represented in crucial communal texts and to participate in identity constructions and decision making. Strong women make strong communities. The interpretive approach demonstrated in this study can be replicated among communities that use biblical texts to construct for themselves a more just and prosperous world.

DEDICATION

To my family: Brian, Benjamin, and Jane.

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"Proverbs 31"

1. The words of Lemuel, a king, the burden with which she rebuked him, his
   mother:
2. "What, my son — and what! son of my womb; and what, son of my vows!?
3. Do not give to women your *chayil*, or your ways to *machoth* kings."
4. "Not for kings, Lemuel, not for kings the drinking of wine, or for princes,
   beer."
5. "… Lest he should drink and forget the decrees and change the verdict of the
   sons of oppression."
6. " 'Give beer to the perishing,
   and wine to the bitter of soul' —
7. Let *him* drink and forget his poverty;
   let *him* not remember his toil anymore."
8. "Open your mouth for the speechless,
   on behalf of all who are perishing.
9. Open your mouth — judge rightly!
   Plead the case of the oppressed and needy."
10. *Eshet chayil*, who can find?
    Her value is far beyond corals.
11. Her husband puts full confidence in her
    and never lacks for plunder.
12. She supplies for him good things,
    not bad, all the days of her life.
13. She pursues wool and flax
    and applies her hands with pleasure.
14. She is like trading ships;
    From far away she brings her food.
15. And she rises while it is still night
    and provides prey to her house
    and assigned tasks [/portions] to her girls.
16. She makes plans about a field and grabs it;
    From the fruit of her hand she plants a vineyard.
17. She binds with strength her loins
    and she braces her arms.
18. She knows that her trading is good,
    and her lamp does not go out at night.
19. She thrusts her hands toward the spindle;
    Her palms grasp the spindle-whorl.
20. Her palms she stretches toward the poor;
    Her hands she thrusts toward the needy.

21. She does not fear snow for her household,
    because all of them are clothed in double layers.
22. She makes bed coverings for herself;
    Linen and purple are her clothes.
23. Known at the gates is her husband,
    in his sitting with the elders of the city.
24. Fine linen wraps she makes and sells;
    Woven belts she delivers to *Kena'any*.
25. Strength and honor are her garments,
    and she laughs about the days to come.
26. She opens her mouth with wisdom,
    and the teaching of *chesed* is on her tongue.
27. Watching over the actions of her house,
    for laziness does not eat bread.
28. Her sons arise and bless her,
    her husband, and he praises her.
29. "Many daughters do *chayil*,
    but you, you ascend above them all."
30. *Chen* is false and beauty a vapor;
    Woman — fear of Yahweh — she! *She* will be praised.
31. Give to her from [/Celebrate her for] the fruit of her hands,
    and may they [/they will] praise her in the gates, her works.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY: THEORETICAL EXCURSIONS

Two women of worth: one notable for her speech (vv. 1-9), and the other, her actions (vv. 10-31). Each dwells within her own distinctive genre — an oracle and an acrostic; each partnered with a key question. Lemuel's mother asks, "What, my son — ?!" and of the *eshet chayil,* others ask, "… who can find?" Questions invite dialogue; they imagine not only a hearer but a respondent. So the posing of questions stimulates greater engagement in readers than statements alone, as readers perceive the inherent invitation, even expectation, for response. This is particularly true when posed with emotion. Readers commonly understand Lemuel's mother to speak in exasperation, shock, or dismay. The question posed about the *eshet chayil* can also be understood as emotion-laden, for example, with wistfulness, longing or loss. Readers, emotional beings themselves, identify with and enter into whatever turmoil the emotional language suggests, perhaps a subconscious exercise toward handling whatever real-life challenges may come their way.[1]

Too often, however, biblical texts have dramatic elements strained out of them when an assumed genre or speaker causes interpreters not to see them.[2] Proverbs 31 is wisdom literature, an instruction and an encomium. These classifications direct readers

[1] Linda C. Garro, "Narrating Troubling Experiences," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 40/1 (2003): 6.

[2] See Mieke Bal on texts: "Masterful interpretations based on invisible assumptions can thus be given an authority that censors other views." Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: U of Toronto, 2009), 16-17.

toward certain meanings. But genres are imprecise, a best guess at patterns of structure and style. Interpreters must understand them as fluid enough to allow reading with different assumptions derived from different assigned classifications. So I propose to do.

As I read this chapter, the emotion, hints of conflict, and unresolved endings jump out at me, indicating that more is taking place in these verses than somber instruction or unreserved praise. This leaves me with my own unsettled feelings and questions. I want to know what is going on to provoke these words, both in the world created by the text and in the ancient community producing it. What is the speaker trying to achieve through this particular rhetorical arrangement: whose interests are promoted and whose imperiled? What happens as a result, both within the text and in communities reading it?

The dramatic elements of the text and my questions about them suggest a study of Proverbs 31 as narrative via the hermeneutical lens of socio-narratology. Socio-narratology combines narratology's appreciation for the world-making capacity of narratives[3] with a sociological interest in the function and impact of narratives upon communities developing and reading them.[4] It is an approach advanced by Arthur W. Frank, who in *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* explicates socio-narratology as examining 1) how stories give people the resources to figure out who they are, 2) how they both connect and disconnect people, 3) how they inspire toward good, 4) how they create and play with boundaries, and 5) how they make life dangerous, especially by casting others as objects of aggression.[5] Such an approach will expose a fuller picture of

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[3] All narratives have world-creating power, writes David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 16.

[4] Thus my approach resists Norman Whybray's assertion that Proverbs is more concerned with individuals than community. See Norman Whybray, "Proverbs," in *The Good Life in the Old Testament, ed. Norman Whybray (London, New York: T&T Clark,* 2002), 161.

[5] Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 71. For a critique, see Jarmila Mildorf: "This open-endedness of the proposed research

the world generated by and in Proverbs 31.

Some argue that poems cannot be considered narratives.[6] Even so, as Mieke Bal points out, narratological analysis of non-narrative texts can supply insights overlooked by traditional approaches.[7] Much of the processing involved in understanding a text as narrative occurs within the minds of readers as they pick up on textual details and fill in gaps to form a story worth following and figuring out.[8] The oracle and acrostic that comprise Proverbs 31 each contain the elements that Hilde Lindemann Nelson prioritizes in identifying elements of story: selectively depicting human experience in ways that are both interpretive and connective.[9] Verses 1-9 portray a mother's highly personal rebuke of her son concerning social expectations, while vv. 10-31 use a husband-wife relationship to depict human longings, anxieties and needs. Marie-Laure Ryan's contends that narrativity can be understood as degrees along a continuum stretching from description to narrative.[10] In Proverbs 31, individuated subjects, locations, the suggestion of "event," and indications of conflict warrant its classification as "narrative-like," or as "narratized description."[11] Therefore, this project will approach these two pericopes as narratives.

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method, where everything seems to be at the discretion of the researcher, is problematic, as it may well lead to arbitrariness." Jarmila Mildorf, "Letting Stories Breathe: Socio-narratology," (review) *Biography* 34, no. 4 (2011): 835.

[6] Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 6.

[7] Bal, 13.

[8] See Richard J. Gerrig and Giovanna Egidi, "Cognitive Psychological Foundations of Narrative Experiences," in *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. David Herman (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2003), 36.

[9] Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 11-12.

[10] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a Definition of Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 28-31. In addition, Frank promotes the study of narrative to include "the fullest range of storytelling, from folklore to everyday conversation." Frank, 12.

[11] Harold F. Mosher, Jr, "Towards a Poetics of Descriptized Narration," *Poetics Today* 3, (1991): 426.

Scholars have yet to treat Proverbs 31 in such fashion. Norman Whybray's survey of modern study of Proverbs reports that few have engaged vv. 1-9 at all, with commentary up to 1995 restricted mostly to textual and philological issues.[12] Since then Makhosazana Keith Nzimande's 2005 dissertation trained a postcolonial hermeneutical lens upon the interests promoted in vv. 1-9.[13] Other feminist interpreters have nodded toward narrativity through engaging in limited character analysis of Lemuel's mother. Carole Fontaine writes that the mother has internalized the male fear of women prevalent throughout Proverbs.[14] Christine Yoder argues that the mother is attempting to snap her son out of his "stupor."[15] She writes, "One imagines the mother scolding Lemuel … seizing a bottle from him … and waving it toward the masses whose plight she depicts without mincing words."[16]

As for vv. 10-31, only limited attention to narrative elements has occurred. Historian Ehud Ben Zvi does use narrative terms such as "story," "villains," and "plot" in his exploration of how the poem sheds light on the thought and memory of ancient Israel and the economy and society of Yehud.[17] But he only cursorily drops these terms and does not expound how narrativity of the poem contributes to meaning. Much debate has taken place concerning the *nature* of the *eshet chayil*: whether a "real" or "ideal"[18]

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[12] Norman Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs: A Survey of Modern Study* (Leiden: New York: Brill, 1995), 98.

[13] Makhosazana Keith Nzimande, *Postcolonial Interpretation in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Gibirah in the Hebrew Bible in the Light of Queen Jezebel and the Queen Mother of Lemuel* (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Bright Divinity School, Texas Christian University, 2005).

[14] Carole Fontaine, "Proverbs," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 159.

[15] Christine Yoder, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 292.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ehud Ben Zvi, "The 'Successful, Wise, Worthy Wife' of Proverbs 31:10-31 as a Source for Reconstructing Aspects of Thought and Economy in the Late Persian / Early Hellenistic Period," in *The Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context,* eds. Marvin Lloyd Miller, et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015): 27-50.

[18] See Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999);

woman, an allegory or personification of wisdom,[19] aspect of God,[20] or incarnation of a goddess.[21] But there is little attempt to conceive her as a round character, one who struggles. Again, feminist focus has begun to surface such concerns. For example, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan asserts that the *eshet chayil* exhibits multiple "pathologies" that real women must resist for their own and their families' good.[22]

My project fans these sparks of narrative recognition to see how big a fire can be flamed. I engage a close reading that identifies an assortment of narrative elements and seeks to understand what meanings they make and toward what purpose. For such a project, I work with the version of Proverbs 31 as published in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, even though ancient manuscripts such as the *Septuagint* position portions of the chapter earlier in the book of Proverbs.[23] This could produce different meanings according to a differing textual context. At some point someone decided these two poems belong together and at the close of Proverbs; this is the version of the text engaged. The chapter is divided into four parts: vv. 1-9, 10-22, 23-30, and 31. The first division is obvious because the acrostic begins at verse 10. Verse 23, the midway point of the

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Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Bruce K. Waltke, "The Role of the 'Valiant Wife' in the Marketplace," *Crux* (35, no. 3 1999): 23-34; Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2001).

[19] See Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985); E. Jacob, "Sages et alphabet: a propose de Proverbs 31:10-31" in *Hommages a Andre Dupont-Sommer* (Paris: Librairie d'Amerique et d'Orient Adrien Maisonneuve): 287-295; Thomas P. McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31" Revue Biblique (92, vol. 1: 1985) 25-46.

[20] Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 250.

[21] Bernhard Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: a Hebrew Goddess Redefined* (US: Pilgrim Press, 1986).

[22] Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Rethinking the 'Virtuous' Woman (Proverbs 31): A Mother in Need of Holiday," in *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009): 111.

[23] While the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* is not a critical edition, comparison of its Proverbs 31 text to Michael Fox's scholarly edition reveals no significant differences. See Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs: An Eclectic Edition with Introduction and Textual Commentary* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).

acrostic, introduces a new space, the city gates, and intensifies focus on honor, so it forms a suitable point for independent analysis. Verse 31 appears to be the climax of the poem's drama, so also worthy of isolated focus.

Some Key Narrative Elements

To aid in my endeavor, I draw upon analyses of narrative elements laid out in introductory overview texts, especially *Narratology* by Mieke Bal and *An Introduction to Narratology* by Monika Fludernik. The parts comprising narrative such as plot, setting, characterization, narration, event, and point of view — each when fully explored adds depth to interpretation. In *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible,* David Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell explain how narrative analysis enhances interpretation of biblical texts, which are notable for their reticence and which traditional critics have hesitated to interpret narratively. I follow their example of both isolating narrative elements present in the text and recognizing that all these are interdependent, combining to produce meanings.[24]

Characterization forms one important narrative element. I am interested in how readers identify with the figures presented in Proverbs 31: King Lemuel, his mother, the *eshet chayil* and her husband. Can we understand them as characters? If so, how much depth of character may we plumb? To what extent may readers identify with them, learn from them and imitate them? For such explorations, Gunn and Fewell offer a persuasive argument as to why, despite commentators' historical resistance, it is acceptable, even necessary to "psychologize." By this they mean, to engage with biblical textual characters in similar ways that we engage with people in real life: observing, analyzing, making

[24] David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 128.

assumptions, inferences, and conclusions about them.[25] Gunn and Fewell argue that to refuse to do so is to unfairly denigrate ancient authors as primitive, incapable of sophisticated communication via innuendo or implication.[26] But the ancient text is not unsophisticated; it can and does sustain elaborate character construction.[27] Furthermore, readers of any narrative text, ancient or modern, unavoidably engage in speculation about characters; that is what makes a story meaningful, even if such interpretation, it must be acknowledged, is subjective and forms only one constructed option among many.[28] The character sketches I produce will be based upon details of the text, not extraneous flights of fancy, but also, in many cases, details not explicitly stated. They emerge, rather, as I question motives and probe implications of what descriptions, actions, and expressions I detect.

"Psychologizing" characters — making much ado of implicit as well as explicit details — includes attention to emotions. In *The Heart of Biblical Narrative: Rediscovering Biblical Appeal to the Emotions*, Karl Allen Kuhn names the pathos experienced by characters as one means by which texts prompt in readers an affective response.[29] Whereas biblical scholars have traditionally marginalized "the emotional expression and pull of texts," Kuhn argues that emotionally engaging readers is a fundamental aspect of literary works.[30] Attention to such makes plain an author's rhetorical goals.[31] I will draw upon Kuhn to understand the presence and function of

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[25] See Gunn and Fewell, 46-81.
[26] Gunn and Fewell, 47-48.
[27] Ibid., 48-49.
[28] Ibid., 50.
[29] Karl Allen Kuhn, *The Heart of Biblical Narrative: Rediscovering Biblical Appeal to the Emotions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 49-50.
[30] Ibid., 29.
[31] Ibid., 59.

emotion in a mother-son clash (vv. 1-9) and a wish-fulfillment fantasy (vv. 10-31). Patrick Colm Hogan's *Affective Narratology* holds value for interpreting vv. 1-9, especially its description of "attachment stories," those that evoke powerful, primordial emotions through triggering memories of readers' own struggles to care for and yet exist independently of their parents.[32] Francoise Mirguet cautions that the presence of emotion in Hebrew texts holds a somewhat different meaning than modern perceptions of emotion. Whereas we tend to emphasize the individual experience of the self, ancient societies emphasized a social dimension to emotion. [33] Often one person acts in response to another's suffering in hierarchical ways, "organizing social relationships and shaping power dynamics."[34]

In light of such differences in worldview, some critics argue that modern psychological constructs ought not be applied to characters developed by ancient people. However, taken to extreme degree, such an objection would severely limit all study of the past. While caution serves, in practice, historians and social scientists do assume some level of similarity between past and present civilizations.[35] Regarding psychology and emotion, *awareness* of a given quality among ancient writers or receivers of a text is not required for that quality to be detectable by later readers. Take shame, for example, which figures in Proverbs 31. We can detect shame as a driving emotion in people or characters regardless of their awareness of it either in the past or present. As reader-response and narrative criticism both argue, meaning does not lie primarily in what an author intends,

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[32] See pages 185-235 of Patrick Colm Hogan, *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

[33] Francoise Mirguet, "What is an 'emotion' in the Hebrew Bible?" *Biblical Interpretation* 24, No. 4-5 (2016), 444.

[34] Ibid., 456.

[35] Linda A. Dietch, "The Social Worlds of Biblical Narrative" in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative* ed. Danna Nolan Fewell, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 518.

anyway, but in what readers perceive. I interpret the text today for people today and so engage any useful tool available to me.

When it comes to characters, the narrative critics named above include narrators as characters, worthy, too, of being questioned and analyzed. This study, too, attends to the narrator as character in both of Proverbs 31's poems. This increases the recognized conflict, drama and suspense experienced in characters and among readers as, like any character, readers may question the reliability and objectivity of a narrator's words.[36] Analyzing the narrator also invites recognizing yet another character present in narrative scenes and events: the narratee(s), the "intrafictional addressee[s] of the narrator's discourse."[37] For Proverbs 31, this includes apprentice scribes, boys, who may be learning to read and write through such a text.[38] It also may include the larger community, a social network known to gather at city gates to share information. We will explore whether such an audience was likely the empowered elite or a disenfranchised peasant class. Such an audience might very well enjoy performance of these poems. Their implied, inferred presence impacts the manner in which the narrator speaks.

Attending to narrator and narratees as characters draws attention to narrative "levels." As Fludernik explains, two levels may be distinguished in every narrative, the "level of the world represented in the story and the level at which this representation takes place."[39] Proverbs 31 contains sections where the narration is ambiguous, leading to uncertainty as to whether the narrator is within the scene or exterior to it. Bal labels this

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[36] As Wayne Booth first articulated in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

[37] Fludernik, 23.

[38] Acrostics may have functioned as tools for scribal instruction, writes F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp. *On Biblical Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 304.

[39] Fludernik, 21.

"text interference." Such occurs when "narrator's text and actor's text are so closely related that a distinction into narrative levels can no longer be made."[40] Such phenomena has bearing upon characterization, plot development and, ultimately, the themes of the two poems, complicating the text, multiplying options for interpreting it. Close examination of Proverbs 31 uncovers more than just two levels. The levels of implied author and reader and actual author and readers (or hearers) can be detected as well. Rather than ignoring these, or resolving them, as commonly occurs, I draw upon Fludernik, Bal, and Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan's conceptions of narrative levels to trace how far back the text telescopes as it switches narrators and blurs who speaks and who sees, exploring whether a corresponding switch in narratees occurs that breaks the fourth wall to address readers directly.

Focalization plays an important part in who speaks and who sees at these narrative levels. As Bal explains, "focalization distinguishes between the vision through which the elements are presented and the identity of the voice that is verbalizing that vision."[41] The latter constitutes narrator, and the former, focalizer. Together, they influence what is noticed, what matters in the world of the text, and how the audience feels about those objects. Focalization, writes Bal, is "… the most important, most penetrating, and most subtle means of manipulation."[42] But the discerning reader, aware of focalization's effect, can resist its ideological sway. Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes have applied Bal's conception of focalization in vv. 1-9 to tease out traces of women's voices peeking through a text dominated by a male worldview.[43]

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[40] Bal, 56.
[41] Ibid., 145.
[42] Ibid., 176.
[43] Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male*

Concerning vv. 1-9, this study entertains the notion of a double focalization and explores how each focalization reveals qualities about each focalizer. For vv. 10-31 it traces how the focalization affects the proclamation of praise and explores how focalization shifts throughout the poem and how this shift impacts meaning.

Understanding Texts as Dialogic

As Bal observes, simply noting literary features accomplishes little. Rather, the value of narratological scrutiny ought to be to gain perspective on culture through asking such questions as, "To what is this a reply?"[44] Such a view conceives of texts as participating in communal conversations, and it leans heavily on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who promoted texts as *dialogic*. I too will rely on Bakhtin's literary theory for interpreting Proverbs 31.

Writing in Soviet-era Russia, Bakhtin suffered political constraints that suppressed some of his works, clouded the authorship of others, and delayed his recognition in the West.[45] Eventually, as his work became known, it vastly expanded possibilities for understanding rhetorical activity within texts. Bakhtin described traditional scholars as picking one style within a novel to describe the novel overall, falsely promoting consistency of voice, an approach Bakhtin described as "monologic."[46] In contrast, Bakhtin understood texts as "polyphonic," containing multiple voices, perspectives, interests, and arguments. He wrote, "Any concrete discourse … is

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Voices in the Hebrew Bible (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1993), 127-130. See also Athalya Brenner, "Figurations of Women in Wisdom Literature," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 50-56.

[44] Bal, 227.

[45] Pam Morris, "Introduction," in *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 1.

[46] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263-265.

entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents."[47] Furthermore, words have a history; traces of previous usages remain to influence meaning either by confirming or contesting the present utterance.[48] This makes texts dialogic not only in relation to the words in proximity on the page but also with words that have come prior. Each utterance occurring in response to previous utterances requires recognizing that no utterance is final; each may trigger some new response.[49] Focusing primarily on Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novels, Bakhtin celebrated dialogism for resisting the hierarchy of author/narrator over characters that exists in monologic texts and instead allowing multiple perspectives to coexist.

Although Bakhtin expressed reservations concerning the potential of poetry to display dialogism,[50] biblical scholars have applied his theory to understand biblical texts, both narrative and poetic.[51] Such an approach works well for Proverbs 31. For one reason, Proverbs 31 contains at key points multiple ambiguities and contradictions. Whereas other critical approaches demand that these be somehow resolved or dismissed, dialogism permits them to be recognized as legitimate communicative morsels, worthy of study and integration into the overall message of the text. As Bakhtin writes admiringly of Dostoyevsky: "In every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a crack, and a tendency to go over immediately to another contradictory

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[47] Ibid., 276.

[48] Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 47.

[49] Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *The Journal of Religion* 76.2 (1996), 294.

[50] Vice, 77.

[51] See Roland Boer, *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *The Journal of Religion* 76.2 (1996), 290–306.

expression; in every gesture he detected confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously; he perceived the profound ambiguity, even multiple ambiguity of every phenomenon."[52]

In explaining how texts are dialogic, Bakhtin identified patterns of words that serve rhetorical purposes. These he labelled with such terms as the sideways glance, interruption, juxtaposition of quotations, change in address, loopholes, double-voicedness, questions, carnivalesque and intertextuality. Such patterns assert either a centripetal or centrifugal force.[53] Both forces are always present in any text: common understandings that "unify and centralize the verbal ideological world," and differences and interruptions that disunify and decentralize.[54] These centripetal and centrifugal patterns I note within my own close reading, trusting Bakhtin's promise: "It is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language."[55]

One scholar has described the benefits of dialogism as understanding meaning not as a "fixed" object needing to be discovered, but as concepts that come into existence through interaction between "many subjects, between texts and readers and between texts."[56] Frank describes stories as being "out of control."[57] They are "tricksters,"[58] he writes, saying one thing one moment, and another the next, depending on the position of

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[52] Mikhail Bakhtin, excerpt from "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 91-92.
[53] Bakhtin, "Discourse," 272.
[54] Ibid., 270.
[55] Ibid., 272.
[56] David Lodge, *After Bakhtin* (London: Routledge, 1990), 86.
[57] Frank, 35.
[58] Ibid., 36.

the reader and where the focus is directed. Marginalized characters have a different understanding of what is going on than those who dominate. Such is duly noted in this interpretation of Proverbs 31. We will examine how and whether persons of power such as Lemuel's mother and the *eshet chayil* represent and treat the marginalized of their r society and whether and how these marginalized are also speaking in the text.

As unfixed meaning, dialogism encompasses reader-response criticism. I approach Proverbs 31 assuming that readers play an active role in creating meaning through what they ignore, prioritize and inject. Every text contains gaps that readers fill, largely unconsciously, according to their experience and assumptions.[59] Any text will also contain contradictions or unresolved loose ends that readers work to resolve, or ignore, in order to solidify in their own minds a story that makes sense in the way they need. Tiny bits can make a big difference, such as in Prov. 31.31 the presence of the word *min*, meaning "of" or "from." Does this modify the speaker's exhortation to give, not "*the* fruit of her hands," her entire produce or profit, but "*of* the fruit of her hands," a mere portion of that profit? Perhaps it is the same thing, really, or not a significant difference, a reader may wish to reason, in order to see the speaker as entirely generous in his words. Or perhaps *min* indeed *is* significant, betraying in one tiny syllable the true motive and desire of the speaker's heart. Such are the details to be identified and explored. I do not promote my socio-narratological reading of Proverbs 31 as the best or only legitimate interpretation. It is, rather, one selective interpretation that emerges from attending to the choices I make as a reader located in one specific space and time, interacting with the text's characters, narrator(s), and authors as I conceive them.

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[59] Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, "Ideology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 218.

A final reason dialogism suits for interpreting Proverbs 31 concerns intertextuality. As Fewell has noted, the Bible is itself a compilation of texts that "complement, supplement, contradict, and undermine one another."[60] Similarity of theme and vocabulary connect Proverbs 31 to other texts both within and outside the canon. I draw upon heroes of Judges, Ruth, Esther, and Job to interpret and assess the work of Proverbs 31 within community.

Narrative Work

As stated above, socio-narratology attends to both the function and impact of narratives. What happens as a result of reading this text? For this approach, I draw upon Frank's *Letting Stories Breathe* and Nelson's *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*. "What happens" is especially relevant to a text that is a part of the Bible, whose readers have been enjoined for millennia in communities of faith to receive it as words from God, ultimate authority. Within biblical studies, Fewell has championed socio-narratology as a means of understanding the work of biblical narrative: "… what biblical stories accomplish cognitively, socially, and ethically, for good and ill, both as literary artifacts of the ancient world and as living literary specimens that continue to shape contemporary cultures and individual identities."[61] I save reflections as to the ongoing impact of Proverbs 31 for my final chapter, with the bulk of my focus on the work of the text in the ancient world.

Narratives express communal problems, anxieties and needs. According to Frank, through the sharing of stories, people put into order "the confusing, complicated

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[60] Danna Nolan Fewell, "The Work of Biblical Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative,* ed. Danna Nolan Fewell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 18.

[61] Fewell, 4.

conditions of their lives."[62] I want to know how the ancient community in Persian-era Yehud may have been processing its circumstances via Proverbs 31's two scenes. Narratives often have an enemy or antagonist; can we detect one here? If so, whom does that figure represent? Given the oracle and acrostic's repeated mention of economic concerns in emotional, conflicted ways, I am particularly interested in the economic situation. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi cites Orit Avnery to argue that for this ancient community, women formed a particularly suitable subject upon whom to project ideas about accessing power as a marginalized group, because women, to men, are both "other" as "not men" but also "insider" as managers of the home.[63] So I examine how gendered identities promote communal understandings of best economic practices. Establishing boundaries is another prominent means by which these ancient writers, labeled the "literati" by Ben Zvi,[64] could make sense of their situation. Boundaries define where one group ends and another begins. Proverbs 31 depicts both social and physical boundaries, but it also shows these boundaries being crossed. Such liminal spaces supply a community the opportunity to rethink prevailing structures and identities.[65] Probing these enables readers to consider what aspects of this community are being set forward for renegotiation.

Besides expressing a community's problems, anxieties and needs, narratives also function as response to the same. I will examine what values, identities and activities Proverbs 31 promotes and to what purpose. Are these a resistance to foes,

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[62] Frank, 13.

[63] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "The Lives of Women in Postexilic Era," in *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, eds. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Calduch-Benages (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 26.

[64] By this Ben Zvi means the elite members of post-exilic Yehud who had the means and opportunity to read, write, and study texts.

[65] Fewell, 11. See also Frank, 70.

accommodation to them, or some combination of both? Such elements produce an ideology that promotes the dominance of one group over others, making the dominant group's occupation of influential spaces seem natural and not to be questioned. What ideology inhabits Proverbs 31? Yoder asserts that the chapter promotes one of "affluent and moderately wealthy members of an urban commercial class."[66] But given the multiple ambiguities, contradictions and shifts in speaker, does it promote more than one?

For such questions, understanding the use of oral versus written communication within imperial contexts can be illuminating. According to Jonathan Draper, in the ancient world, both peasants and upper classes preferred orality as their means of transmitting information, but written texts functioned as a means of asserting social control, because only the elite had access to them, thus in texts their preferences could dominate.[67] Nevertheless, traces of peasant interests could remain in written texts to the extent that they faithfully represent orality, because orality did effectively facilitate communication by the lower classes.[68] Scribes performed many services for the elite, including record keeping, correspondence, astronomy, calendars, divinations and producing propaganda. Due to their independence as highly skilled workers, they may have found themselves at odds with those they served and thus in written texts projected a criticism of the ruling class akin to that of the peasants.[69] These diverse interests hold relevance for understanding whose voices speak in Proverbs 31.

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[66] Christine Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2001), 103.

[67] Jonathan Draper, "Orality, Literacy, and Colonialism in Antiquity," in *Orality, Literacy, and Colonialism in Antiquity*, ed. Jonathan Draper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literacy, 2004), 4.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Richard Horsley, "The Origins of the Hebrew Scriptures in Imperial Relations," in *Orality, Literacy, and Colonialism in Antiquity*, ed. Jonathan Draper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literacy, 2004), 118.

In such work identity formation occurs. Nelson defines identity as "a complicated interaction of one's own sense of self and others' understanding of who one is… ."[70] This interaction can occur in real life or through story, as readers see themselves in characters and relate to what the characters experience.[71] I explore how Lemuel, his mother, the *eshet chayil* and her husband construct identities and whether these could be considered "damaged." In this I lean on Nelson's definition of such as being treated by more powerful social groups as "unworthy of full moral respect" and thereby prevented from "occupying valuable social roles or entering into desirable relationships…"[72]

The Work of Spaces

A key indicator of identity concerns spaces — what spaces various figures occupy and how they behave in those spaces. In recent decades, biblical scholars have applied space theory to a variety of biblical texts. One such scholar, Jon Berquist, observes, "The Bible is obsessed with space."[73] Proverbs 31 invokes such spaces as home, fields and vineyards, foreign lands, and city gates. The mention of these spaces is not incidental but fundamental to the work of the passage. Of particular interest for my dissertation are the respective works of theorists Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre builds upon Karl Marx' insistence on noting not just what *is* but also the social relations and forms of relations that exist between what is.[74] Lefebvre's analysis of everyday life asserts that space is not merely a static and neutral aspect of nature. Rather space must be understood as a tripartite construction of physical, mental, and social space

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[70] Nelson, xi.
[71] Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 17.
[72] Nelson, xii.
[73] Jon L. Berquist, "Critical Spatiality and the Construction of the Ancient World," in *'Imagining' Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social and Historical Constructs in Honor of James W. Flanagan*, eds. David M. Gunn and Paula M. McNutt (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 25.
[74] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 83.

according to how people conceive and use it. Approaching spaces in this way reveals a dialectical process of human social activity in which space both is socially produced and socially productive.[75] That is, human activity determines what a space is, and conversely, the limitations, intentions, and real experience of space determine what humans are and how they relate to one another in spaces.

Massey diversifies Lefebvre's Marxist interest in the role of capital shaping space and place, noting that factors such as ethnicity and gender also affect experience of place.[76] According to Massey, the identity of a particular place forms via "the juxtaposition and co-presence there of particular sets of social interrelations, and by the effects which that juxtaposition and co-presence produce."[77] Spatiality, identities, and the relations between these two are all "coconstitutive."[78] Massey also brings special focus to "power-geometry": how certain social groups possess more power than others both to move and to direct mobility.[79]

Reading Proverbs 31 in light of space theory allows us to understand its identity construction in light of how characters move and interact with one another in identified spaces. We can ask in what ways the spaces of Proverbs 31 reflect the projected desires and values of the community, especially the literati. Can we also find glimpses of pragmatic uses of spaces that differ from the presented ideal?

Helpful Exegetical and Socio-Historical Studies

In addition to the theorists mentioned above, I draw upon both biblical scholars

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[75] Ibid., 129.

[76] Doreen Massey, "Power Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, eds. Jon Bird, et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 62.

[77] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 169.

[78] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005), 10.

[79] Doreen Massey, "Power Geometry," 62.

and socio-historians to aid in my analysis. Exegetically, I primarily look to Michael V. Fox and Bruce Waltke to summarize the major contributions of biblical scholars and explain relevant textual emendations, errors and ambiguities.[80] I share Fox's view of the wisdom literature as the work of an elite literati which at times projected a folk school as an artificial ideal.[81] Proverbs as a whole is oriented to males, Fox writes, "addressing them and concerned for males' experience, feelings, and benefits— even when praising women, as in 31:10– 31."[82] Because of this focus within the text, Fox seems impatient with feminist criticisms of it, as if they are irrelevant standards to apply to a patriarchal text. Responding to an assessment of the *eshet chayil* by Carole Fontaine, for example, he writes, "… of course she is praised in accordance with the values of her society. What other ones would be relevant?"[83]

Fox's view notwithstanding, I draw upon the work of feminists examining the chapter for its identity-shaping impact, especially concerning gendered power dynamics. I have mentioned already Brenner and Van Dijk-Hemmes's study of 'F' voices and Fontaine's reflections on internalization. Some feminist scholars have questioned women's complicity in whatever subjugation the text reflects. Diane Bergant describes the queen mother as androcentric, discriminatory, and actively participating in cultivating the next patriarch.[84]

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[80] See Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs: An Eclectic Edition with Introduction and Textual Commentary* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). Michael V. Fox, "Editing Proverbs: The Challenge of the Oxford Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 32 (2006): 1-22. Michael V. Fox, "The Social Location of the Book of Proverbs," in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran*, ed. Michael V. Fox (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 227-39.

[81] Fox, "Social," 238.

[82] Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, xviii.

[83] Ibid., 913.

[84] Diane Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 98-99.

Verses 1-9 have also received attention for their depiction of wealth and poverty. Timothy Sandoval describes these verses as resembling the discourse of other ancient Near Eastern ideologies that expect political elites to maintain justice for the poor.[85] But two other scholars combine feminist commitments with postcolonial methodology to produce a more complex understanding of this passage's relation to social justice. Nzimande portrays Lemuel's mother as "dup[ing] the marginalized into believing that she cares about their plight while she covertly silences their struggles."[86] Writes Joanna Stiebert, this mother's "claims to champion the oppressed are questionable at best, sinister at worst."[87] These "against the grain" readings that question motives and outcomes fuel my reading of the text as quarrel between mother and son that expresses multiple communal interests.

Verses 10-31 have received considerably more exegetical and scholarly attention than vv. 1-9. Albert Wolters identifies vv. 10-31 as a variation of the heroic hymn genre, one that instead of praising military exploits praises economic and domestic productivity.[88] He, like most scholars, views the subject of the Proverbs 31 acrostic as being the *eshet chayil* herself, an idealized woman (either literally or as a symbol for wisdom).[89] On the other hand, Yoder[90] and Ben Zvi independently argue for the true focus of the text being economic. Drawing upon ancient Near Eastern epigraphic and

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[85] Timothy J. Sandoval, *The Discourse of Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2006), 152-153.

[86] Nzimande, 186.

[87] Johanna Stiebert, "The People's Bible, Imbokodo and the King's Mother's teaching of Proverbs 31," *Biblical Interpretation* 20.3 (2012), 278.

[88] Albert Wolters, "Proverbs 31:10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form-Critical Analysis" *Vetus Testamentum* 38.4 (1988): 446-457.

[89] Or both, as per Clifford, 274.

[90] Especially Christine Roy Yoder, "The Woman of Substance (ʾšt-Ḥyl): A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122. 3 (2003): 427-447, and Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2001).

archaeological evidence for insight, Yoder combs the text for economic references, allusions and metaphors previously overlooked and then applies them to understand the woman herself as merchandise.[91] Whereas earlier commentators had interpreted the *eshet chayil* as personification of wisdom based upon ancient Near Eastern goddesses, Yoder argues that the central character draws upon the reality of affluent women in Persian society. The result of Yoder's "socioeconomic reading" is an interpretation that connects economic success with wisdom and piety to convince young men of the advantages to marrying well, advantages including wealth, honor, security and leisure.

As a historian, Ben Zvi analyzes Proverbs 31 to better understand the economy and society of Persian-era Yehud.[92] In so doing, he produces his own interpretation of this poem about the figure he labels the "successful, wise, worthy wife." The poem, he says, offers a utopian vision that promotes a correspondence between this woman both "being and creating a treasure."[93] In these respects, the *eshet chayil* embodies ideal economic behavior for each individual household.[94] The poem is justifying trade and the pursuit of profit beyond the immediate needs of a household as benefiting the larger community,[95] Ben Zvi writes, and it is passing on communal values of work, wealth, profit and agency.[96] I value both Yoder and Ben Zvi for their application of vv. 10-31 to economic realities and needs of community, as I will similarly (though dialogically and narratively) seek to understand the poem, asking such questions as: what does the economic emphasis suggest about the conditions and conversations ongoing in the community developing

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[91] Yoder, *Wisdom*, 77.
[92] or early Hellenistic.
[93] Ben Zvi, 29.
[94] Ibid., 30-31.
[95] Ibid., 32.
[96] Ibid., 37.

and using this text? How is it a response to these?

Ben Zvi briefly addresses the question of why this poem should depict its utopia via a central female figure, and a masculinized female at that.[97] He notes its *Sitz im Buch* with Lady Wisdom[98] and speculates its purpose is to sidestep a prevailing disapproval of commerce[99] and to reassure a vulnerable population.[100] I incorporate the gender analyses of Proverbs 31 conducted by Beatrice Lawrence, Hilary Lipka, and others to better understand how the female figures of Lemuel's mother and the *eshet chayil* function as stable symbolic centers[101] in communal discussion. Male identity construction is also taking place within the poem, which essays by scholars such as David Clines and Stephen Moore illuminate.[102]

The work of several other feminist scholars on vv. 10-31 also informs my project. Esther Fuchs names the Proverbs 31 woman a typical depiction of "good" wives in the Hebrew Bible, rendered good solely because of their devotion toward their husbands.[103] More positively, Claudia Camp, noting the thrice-mention of *betah* ("her house"), understands the woman depicted as not only running the household, but defining it, supplying the household its very identity.[104] Cheryl Kirk-Duggan reads vv. 1-9 and vv. 10-31 as describing the same woman, a Queen/Mother Warrior. This woman is a victim

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[97] Ibid., 35.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid., 34.

[100] Ibid., 38. He reasons that this is because masculine women would be considered better able to compete for needed resources.

[101] A phrase used by Massey, *Space, Place and Gender,* 180.

[102] See *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded,* eds. Ovidiu Creanga and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Phoenix Press 2014) and *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creanga (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010).

[103] Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 174.

[104] Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985), 91.

of systematic oppression, an oppression that compromises her ability to mother in healthy ways.[105] Yoder points out that these verses of tribute constitute also an objectification of women.[106] Such interpretations add complexity to our understanding of the character construction of the text.

Proverbs 31 lacks specific historical association and so is difficult to locate in time and space.[107] Dating of the text by scholars ranges from the pre-monarchic to the Hellenistic eras,[108] but with increasing numbers favoring a later date. Regardless of compositional origin, its editing and arranging continued to occur into the Persian era at least, so it is fair to draw upon the exilic "return" (or relocation) from Babylon to Yehud for broad insights regarding socio-historical context of its incorporation into Proverbs.[109] As Ben Zvi explains his approach, "Given the long-term basic continuity of the relevant socioeconomic context, a wide range such as 'late Persian/early Hellenistic' …" is fine.[110]

As for terminology, John Kessler explains that while the terms *Judeans* or *Jews* have been in use both in the ancient world and modern times, these risk confusion with earlier or later groups also known by these terms.[111] Accordingly I adopt the increasingly common alternatives of *Yehudite* to describe the community and *Yehud*, the place. I reference the newly (re)settled, wealthier class of occupants with connections to Persia as

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[105] Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Rethinking the 'Virtuous' Woman (Proverbs 31): A Mother in Need of Holiday," in *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009): 97-112.

[106] Yoder, "Woman," 446.

[107] Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 499.

[108] Scholars leaning earlier include Fox and Waltke; those favoring later dating include Ben Zvi, Camp, Washington, and Yoder.

[109] "Given the lack of evidence for the final editing, perhaps the best course is to suppose that Proverbs was edited in the same general movement as much of Israel's other sacred literature in the early Second Temple period, that is, in the period from the sixth to the fourth centuries B.C.E." Clifford, 6.

[110] Ben Zvi, 29.

[111] John Kessler, "Persia's Loyal Yahwists: Power Identity and Ethnicity in Achaemenid Yehud," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period,* eds. Oded Lipschitz and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 96.

the *elite*, the *literati*, or the *golah*. Another note concerning word choice: the text itself does not assign Lemuel's mother the title, *gibirah,* that occurs elsewhere in biblical texts to describe influential mothers of kings. I assume significance in the withholding and accordingly resist referencing Lemuel's mother as such or as "Queen Mother" in order not to go beyond the attribution of the text. Albeit with reservation, I leave untranslated "*eshet chayil*" because of the impossibility of retaining all its connotations when choosing between "woman" or "wife" and the many possible meanings of *chayil*. For the same reason in my translation I leave a few additional words untranslated as well, explaining their semantic range within my argument.

Sitz im Leben

When considering the work of Proverbs 31, the social conditions most relevant include the Persian-era economy, gender roles, the judiciary, public performance, and the concepts of honor and shame. In relation to their former status, to neighboring communities and the empire that ruled them, the newly settled community of "returnees" from Babylon in Yehud was small[112] and vulnerable, its cities' walls long since knocked down.[113] To survive, they concerned themselves with preserving a distinct identity and acquiring resources to provide for their needs while rebuffing encroachment of others, including the burdens of empire, which imposed taxes and conscripted workers.[114] Chief among desirable resources were progeny and land, but international trade also presented

[112] Eskenazi, 13. She asserts that the population in Judah was reduced to 20 or at most 30 percent of its former size.

[113] Carey Walsh, "Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City Gates in Biblical Memory," in *Memory and the City*, eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 58.

[114] Jon L. Berquist, "Resistance and Accommodation in the Persian Empire" in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 49.

opportunities.[115] Eskenazi suggests based on Ezra-Nehemiah that men may have far outnumbered women[116] (thus adding an additional level of meaning to Proverbs 31's expression of desire.) A small "elite" group possessed resources, including slaves, while 90 percent, as peasants, struggled to eke out an existence.[117] These two classes can be associated with the respective spaces of cities and villages. Between these two, cultural conditions and practices differed dramatically in the areas of residence, income, consumption, language, religion, education, juridical status and ethnicity.[118]

Such a context suggests the importance of understanding economic conditions of Persian-era Yehud. In *Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea,* Samuel L. Adams describes these as offering opportunities for some groups to accumulate wealth, while others experienced increased hardship due to taxation, loss of land, and kinship groups experiencing splintering either through homelessness or conscripted workers.[119] In such circumstances, marriage functioned as crucial means of solidifying property claims, livelihoods, and possessions.[120] Different types of markets existed, their growth "multifaceted and dynamic,"[121] writes Marvin Miller, who in *The Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context* describes how some markets developed spontaneously along caravan routes as individual households sought to supplement their agrarian production through the sale of crafts and nonagricultural goods.[122]

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[115] Yoder, *Wisdom*, 46.
[116] Eskenazi, 13.
[117] Ibid., 14.
[118] Horsley, 123-124.
[119] Samuel L. Adams*, Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 13.
[120] Ibid., 21.
[121] Marvin L. Miller, "Cultivating Curiosity: Methods and Models for Understanding Ancient Economies," in *The Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context,* eds. Marvin Lloyd Miller, et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 7.
[122] Ibid., Miller.

Scholars disagree as to what extent modern economic concepts apply to the ancient world, with most cautioning against imposing capitalism onto the scene. They do generally agree concerning division and tensions between poorer rural peasants and the wealthier elite located in cities and towns. No independent middle class existed; rather, an elite class of "bureaucrats, functionaries, retainers, merchants and priests" consisting of five to ten percent of the population dominated the 90 percent of peasants and craftspeople.[123] To what extent, if any, are these two groups represented in Proverbs 31? Roland Boer promotes an understanding of the Persian Era as organized according to a "sacred economy" that invoked a deity (or deities) to justify regimes of allocation and extraction.[124] In this society, village communes produce items essential for survival that temple/city complexes as well as the larger social units of state and empire extract for consumption.[125] I will explore how Boer's understanding of the sacred economy can offer insight concerning Lemuel's mother's advice to her son the king. Are they the governing standard of rulers, or a stabilizing policy promoted by hybrid local elites to manage the poor? Or are these words an appeal of peasants who need an advocate for protection? To what extent can we identify all three interests surfacing in the oracle?

Similarly, with Boer's framework in mind we will explore to what extent the description of the *eshet chayil* in vv. 10-31 celebrates the benefits of this system for the economic elite, and to what extent its contradictions and jarring depiction of the *eshet chayil* in relation to the poor convey a complaint. Given the circumstances suggested by

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[123] Douglas A. Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 64.

[124] Roland Boer, "The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: An International Journal of Nordic Theology* 21:1 (2007), 29-48.

[125] Ibid., 38.

Boer's framework, it is also interesting to consider what has not been mentioned in vv. 10-31: neither temple, king, nor taxation, all of which must have functioned importantly in people's lives. Are these omissions mere happenstance, do they reflect a lack of concern, or are they a pointed resistance to domination through envisioning a utopian world in which these burdens simply do not exist?

Because Proverbs 31 portrays its female subjects as full economic participants, it will be helpful to consider the lifestyles of women in antiquity to assess whether Lemuel's mother and the *eshet chayil* are typical or exemplary according to practices of their day. While much is unknown about the lives of women in Persian-era Yehud, clues in extant materials suggest they contributed significantly to economic activity. Carol Meyers has written extensively on the lives of women during biblical times, bringing the discoveries of archaeology into discussions of biblical texts.[126] Although she dates her reconstruction to monarchic and earlier times, many scholars draw upon her depictions as applicable to later eras based on the theory that day-to-day activities of women had not changed, in some cases, for millennia. According to Meyers, ancient women probably possessed considerably more agency and influence than most biblical texts project.[127] In addition to childbearing and childrearing, women ran businesses, managed household food distribution, owned land, and farmed it. Many women possessed the technically advanced skill of weaving textiles, which imbued to them considerable wealth and respect, including associations with wisdom.[128] Although people today may value

[126] Most recently, Carol Meyers, "Double Vision: Textual and Archaeological Images of Women," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* Vol. 5.2 (2016), 112-131; Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[127] Meyers, "Rediscovering," 181.

[128] Ibid., 187.

domestic labor lower than labor outside the home, in ancient Israel, it held significant economic value[129] and gave women personal and social power.[130]

Proverbs 31 asserts that the *eshet chayil* acquires property. Some question whether women in antiquity could own property,[131] but the book of Ruth attests to the practice, as does the example of contemporaneous Mesopotamian and Egyptian women.[132] Documents from Elephantine that show considerable parity between men and women.[133] For example, a woman named Mibtahiah owned an estate and acted as head of her house.[134] But how similar Elephantine was to Yehud is largely unknown. Based on examination of extant contemporaneous texts, Eskenazi concludes that women had "limited but definite legal rights … of marriage, divorce, property, and inheritance."[135]

Also relevant for our study of Proverbs 31 is women's participation in public society. Some ancient Near Eastern cultures promoted seclusion in the home as a virtue for women, as attested in the Ottoman document, *Oeconomicus,* by Xenophon.[136] But what about Yehud? Meyers acknowledges the existence of male and female domains, but writes that this does not constitute a public-private dichotomy of occupation.[137] Rather, female domestic labors extend in their impact beyond the home to public spaces.

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[129] Ibid., 121.

[130] Ibid., 185.

[131] e.g. Ben Zvi, 36. Bernhard Lang, "Women's Work, Household and Property in Two Mediterranean Societies: A Comparative Essay on Proverbs xxxi 10-31," *Vetus Testamentum* 54, no. 2 (2004), 206.

[132] Carolyn Pressler, "Wives and Daughters, Bond and Free: Views of Women in the Slave Laws of Exodus 21.2-11," in *Gender and law in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East,* eds. Victor Matthews, et al. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 166. See also Eskenazi and Yoder.

[133] Antje Labahn, "'Wealthy Women' in Antiquity: the 'Capable Woman' of Proverbs 31:10-31 and Mibtahiah from Elephantine." *In die Skriflig (Online)* 48.1 (2014), 2.

[134] Ibid., 5.

[135] Eskenazi, 21.

[136] Bernhard Lang, "The Hebrew wife and the Ottoman wife: an anthropological essay on Proverbs 31:10-31," *Anthropology and Biblical Studies* (Leiden: Deo, 2004), 146.

[137] Meyers, 123.

According to Adams, they did occupy public spaces more frequently than acknowledged.[138]

Most prominent among these public spaces are the city gates. Scholars such as Daniel Frese, Natalie May, and Carey Walsh[139] explain the features and functions of ancient city gates, including military, commercial, legal, social, and religious activities. Proverbs 31 mentions city gates explicitly twice and also alludes to them when describing the *eshet chayil*. I consider how they function within the poem as both boundary marker and liminal space. Some speculate that scribal instruction took place there,[140] where tall stone walls provided shade for gatherings. In such case, the city gates could serve as both the implied and the actual setting for the reciting of this poem, given that the acrostic may have served as tool for scribal instruction.[141] I will be considering how such a setting for the writing, recitation and hearing of the poem might influence interpretation.

Walsh notes that in the Persian era, the walls and gates of most settlements in Yehud had been long since demolished by conquering armies.[142] Yet these walls and gates lived on in texts and in memories.[143] Cultural memory "often has more to do with legitimating a present social order…"[144] than accurately representing the past, Walsh writes. It is worth asking, what concepts does mention of the city gates trigger in

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[138] Adams, 42.

[139] See Natalie N. May, "Gates and their Functions in Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel," in *The Fabric of Cities: Aspects of Urbanism, Urban Topography and Society in Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome,* eds. Natalie N. May and Ulrike Steinert (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), 77-121; Carey Walsh, "Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City Gates in Biblical Memory," in *Memory and the City*, eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 43-60; Daniel A. Frese, "The civic forum in ancient Israel : the form, function, and symbolism of city gates." Dissertation retrieved from http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8tp5j3ch, 2012.

[140] Mark Sneed, *The Social World of the Sages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 154.

[141] F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2015), 304.

[142] Walsh, 58.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid., 44.

Proverbs 31? Security? Justice? Community? Strength? And how do each separately or all combined impact the meanings of the poem, especially its closing inducement, *"... and let her works praise her in the city gates"* (31)?

Mention of elders in the city gates (23) evokes the image of juridical procedure such as those envisioned in the book of Deuteronomy. According to Walsh, the laws in Deuteronomy that mention city gates invariably have to do with the potential exclusion of a community member.[145] She writes, "… the memory of elders at the gate would signify decisions about who belonged within Yehud's social orbit."[146] Is something similar happening in Proverbs 31, with the gates and elders invoked to signal that the *eshet chayil* is not merely offhandedly praised, but measured and positioned within the community?

Other references to jurisprudence in Proverbs 31 also recommend familiarity with ancient legal customs, especially in vv. 5-9. Boer explains the connection between the judiciary and various social classes as being that the judiciary oversaw the workings of allocation.[147] He writes, "It is not for nothing that many of the laws in the Hebrew Bible deal with the allocation of land, the control of women, the patterns of kinship and inheritance and the nature of patron-client relationships."[148] According to Douglas Knight, the elite shaped jurisprudence to benefit themselves and disadvantage others.[149] In light of the legal allusions in Proverbs 31 and the fact that so many of the interests listed by Boer are touched upon in Proverbs 31, I approach this text seeking to discover what meanings emerge if we consider it as playing some role within juridical procedures.

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[145] Ibid., 51. She cites Deut. 21:15, 19, 22:24, and 25:7.
[146] Ibid., 51.
[147] Boer, 41.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Knight, 36.

The above-mentioned possibilities of instruction in the city gates or juridical speech invites understanding the public performance of oral poems. Unlike our modern engagement with texts, ancient audiences did not experience poems in an isolated, individualistic manner but as a communal performance.[150] Performance criticism looks for "aural, kinetic and visual aspects of performance, that is, for matters of voice and instrumentation, gesture, and setting and performer identity." [151] Such concerns are valuable for Proverbs 31 in light of its several mentions of the body and abrupt shifts in address that signal changing speakers and addressees. These features make a tremendous difference in terms of what the performer intends to communicate and what an audience receives, sometimes, as in the case of sarcastic tone or gesture, rendering a meaning quite the opposite of what one takes from the page. Attention to performance is also useful for detecting humor, which can be easily overlooked when something meant to be spoken is written down. All these hold relevance for interpreting Proverbs 31 when considered as an oral performance.

Within Proverbs 31's two narrative-like scenes, I argue that speakers are citing proverbs to reinforce their arguments. The work of Carole Fontaine, Katheryn Darr, and Aulikki Nahkola on speech performance aids in uncovering where proverbs occur in Proverbs 31, what argument they support, and how. The meaning of a proverb is not absolute or universal, but depends entirely on its context and performance.

Public performance connects with space, because certain styles of speaking occur in certain spaces, each attaining varying rhetorical ends. Mark Sneed identifies three

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[150] Dobbs-Alsopp, 197.

[151] Robert D. Miller, "The Performance of Oral Tradition in Ancient Israel," in *Contextualizing Israel's Sacred Writings*, ed. Brian Schmidt (Atlanta, SBL Press, 2015), 183.

types of public argumentation that correspond to varying settings, including royal courts and public assemblies. These are epideictic, judicial, and deliberative.[152] Sneed claims that deliberative rhetoric, which attempts to persuade the audience to act in some future way, is not a feature of wisdom literature because wisdom literature "does not attempt to call people to take action for a particular cause."[153] However, in fact, we can recognize Proverbs 31 as urging action as part of a public assembly, and doing so expands upon its potential meanings. I consider all three forms of argumentation to appear in Proverbs 31.

Interpreting Proverbs 31's two poems as public performances pulls in the values of honor and shame as they operated within ancient cultures. This is because public oral performances were one means of either gaining or losing honor or shame.[154] Scholars such as Sneed, Zeba Crook, Lyn Bechtel, Victor Matthews and others explain how these concepts functioned in forming individual and communal identities. According to Sneed, a ritual of "challenge and riposte" enabled one man to increase his honor through challenging another. Such challenges could then be countered through physical violence or verbal response.[155] Another public performance, labeled "shaming speech," invoked wisdom themes and social codes to assert social control.[156] Matthews explains, "On those occasions when it is necessary to embarrass a person publicly by using shaming speech, the argument must be publicly staged in order to draw on the energies and backing of a desired audience."[157] Both males and females could engage shaming speech. I will

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[152] Sneed, 247.
[153] Ibid., 248.
[154] Victor Matthews, "Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Situations," in *Gender and law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East,* eds. Victor Matthews, et al. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 100.
[155] Sneed, 271.
[156] Matthews, 99.
[157] Ibid., 100.

examine to what extent elements of Proverbs 31 can be understood to fulfill this purpose.

Renata Rabichev portrays honor and shame as operating differently for males as for females,[158] whereas Crook argues that in some cases societies attributed virtues to men and women in similar ways, and that women could even attain higher honor than men. [159] Once again, economic considerations come into play, as control of production by women was a significant means by which women acquired wealth, power, and honor.[160] Honor features largely in the celebration of the *eshet chayil* and her husband; both possess it in abundance. This leads me to ask how their respective portrayals of honor relate to each other. Does the wife's honor enhance her husband, or detract from it? Can signs of tension be detected related to this issue? And if so, what could these represent? What is at stake within the community that needs reinforcing through this construction?

Conclusion

This introductory chapter sets forth many questions about Proverbs 31 and explains why a socio-narratological analysis will help with answering these questions. It identifies the scholars from whom I borrow to help loosen soil stiffened by interpretative traditions. The theoretical tools assembled are eclectic, including narratology, social-scientific, feminist, space, even post-colonial attentions. My aim through this diverse collection applied to Proverbs 31 is to harvest more meanings for more people. It does not suffice to feed those of vastly different tastes and needs just one or two identical meals. Better to set out many nourishing options for people to choose. *Bon appetit!*

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[158] Renata Rabichev, "The Mediterranean Concepts of Honour and Shame as seen in the Depiction of Biblical Women," *Religion & Theology* 3, no. 1 (1996): 51-63.

[159] Zeba Crook, "Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128.3 (2009), 605.

[160] Carolyn Osiek, "Women, Honor, and Context in Mediterranean antiquity," *Hervormde teologiese studies* 64.1 (2008), 334.

CHAPTER TWO

PROV. 31.1-9: A MOTHER'S INSERTION TOWARD KINGLY CONVERSION

"What, my son — ?!"

Words attributed to a woman — a mother — commence this concluding chapter to the book of Proverbs. The feminine framing, as often noted, forms with Proverbs' beginning chapters bookends to a collection of wisdom scenes and sayings. Words related to wisdom occur more than 100 times in Proverbs, instilling wisdom as practical knowledge required of everyone and essential to living a good life.[1] Mark Sneed's compendium on Hebrew wisdom and wisdom literature reveals wisdom taking many forms: problem solving, technical skill, discerning omens and instructing youth, to name but a few.[2] Its literature, too, can vary, including riddles, dialogues, poems, instructions, prayers, and hymns. Here, Prov. 31.1-9 personifies wisdom as, shall we say, "concerned" mother. She rebukes, warns, advises.

Although commentaries frequently note the *uniqueness* within wisdom literature of a mother's teaching,[3] traditional methodologies for interpreting biblical texts have not done much to even acknowledge, much less explore, the *significance* in Prov. 31.1-9 of a wisdom teaching presented as a mother's rebuke. Norman Whybray's 1995 survey of modern study of Proverbs reports that scholars have little engaged this pericope, with

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[1] Norman Whybray, "Proverbs," in *The Good Life in the Old Testament*, ed. Norman Whybray (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 177.

[2] Mark Sneed, *The Social World of the Sages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

[3] e.g. Tremper V. Longman, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 538; Christine Yoder, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 289; Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 503.

commentary restricted mostly to textual and philological issues.[4] Scholars have discussed the historicity of King Lemuel[5] and whether his mother occupied an official role with political clout.[6] Aramaisms indicate late dating[7] and invite consideration of foreign origin or merely an attempt to appear foreign-sounding.[8] As well, scholars have noted and labeled rhetorical and literary features such as an "emphatic rhetorical negative,"[9] legal terminology,[10] hapax legomena,[11] and hendiadys.[12] James Crenshaw offers a structural analysis based on distinctive grammatical features: superscription (31:1), direct appeal (31:2), and four words of counsel (31:3-9). "The advice takes various forms: (1) an imperative with a negative (31:3), (2) counsel without a verb, but containing a rationale for the particular course of action (31:4-5); (3) a positively stated imperative with three accompanying jussives (31:6-7); and (4) three imperatives, positively stated (31:8-9)."[13] Such attention does little to expand upon meaning or function of the text as could be derived from close attention to dramatic features such as characterization, conflict, emotion and suspense.

In addition, topical studies of motherhood in biblical texts largely ignore Prov.

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[4] Norman Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs: A Survey of Modern Study* (Leiden: New York: Brill, 1995), 98. Common topics include the meaning of *massa* (1) and *machoth* (3).

[5] Waltke believes he was probably a proselyte (503). Lemuel is a real person, according to Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 26.

[6] See Susan Ackerman, "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (Fall 1993): 387-403; Makhosazana Keith Nzimande, *Postcolonial Interpretation in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Gibirah in the Hebrew Bible in the Light of Queen Jezebel and the Queen Mother of Lemuel* (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Bright Divinity School, Texas Christian University, 2005).

[7] C.H. Toy, *Proverbs: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 538.

[8] e.g. Longman, 534.

[9] Leo Perdue, *Proverbs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 271.

[10] William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 410.

[11] Waltke, 505.

[12] Ibid., 506.

[13] James Crenshaw, "A Mother's Instruction to Her Son (Proverbs 31:1-9)," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 15 no. 4 (1988), 14.

31.1-9 or, if mentioned, its narrative elements. *Making Sense of Motherhood: Biblical and Theological Perspectives* does not reference Prov. 31.1-9.[14] *The House of the Mother*, by Cynthia Chapman, briefly groups it with other passages that explicitly reference female reproductive organs.[15] In *Stories of Biblical Mothers*, Leila Leah Bronner summarizes the view of Midrashic commentators who equate Lemuel and his mother with Solomon and Bathsheba. These commentators understand the name, Lemuel, translated as "dedicated to God," to indicate that in following his mother's wise advice, the king attains godliness.[16]

It is true, some feminist scholars have begun to break open the implications of a female speaker. Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes identify an authentic female voice despite the likely male authorship and editing.[17] The mother has internalized the male fear of women prevalent throughout Proverbs, writes Carole Fontaine.[18] She is attempting to snap her son out of his "stupor," Christine Yoder argues.[19] "One imagines the mother scolding Lemuel … seizing a bottle from him … and waving it toward the masses whose plight she depicts without mincing words."[20] Cheryl Kirk-Duggan asks whether the queen mother is a good mother, supplying her son with a positive identity that appropriately separates from parental control, or whether she fosters a dysfunctional relationship by violating boundaries that must develop between mother and son.[21] South

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[14] Beth M. Stovell, ed., *Making Sense of Motherhood: Biblical and Theological Persectives* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016).

[15] Cynthia Chapman, *The House of the Mother* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

[16] Leila Leah Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 52.

[17] Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts, Male and Female Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 127-130.

[18] Carole Fontaine, "Proverbs," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 159.

[19] Yoder, 292.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Rethinking the 'Virtuous' Woman (Proverbs 31): A Mother in Need

African scholar Makhosazana Nzimande critiques Western feminist interpretations of this text for ignoring imperial and class dynamics that hold just as much relevance as gender for assessing ethical ramifications.[22] While the queen mother may be affirmed for her strong role influencing family life, Nzimande writes, she is a "tricky figure,"[23] also collaborating in systematically oppressing the poor.[24]

Such scholars have tuned in to the drama, suspense, and character construction present in this exchange between mother and son. A socio-narratological approach to Prov. 31.1-9 can build upon these efforts to explain what this unique depiction of wisdom as a rebuking mother is accomplishing within the world created by the text and in the minds of interested readers. As discussed in chapter one, Prov. 31.1-9 is not a full narrative, but it is narrative-*like*, a dramatic chunk containing characterization, focalization, dialogue, conflict, suspense, and more. The text drops readers into the middle of a scene, causing them to infer what events occur beforehand or after. Leo Perdue illustrates this readerly act when he surmises that Lemuel is a newly installed king: "Perhaps his royal father has recently died."[25] Such circumstances, of course, we cannot know, but Perdue's proposal demonstrates cooperation with the implied crisis within the mother's words.

In this chapter I will expand upon and analyze these narrative features of Prov. 31.1-9 to understand their contribution to meaning. For this, I draw upon Bakhtinian reading strategies, research into ancient orality, and contemporary psychological theory.

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of Holiday," in *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), 102.

[22] Nzimande, 200.

[23] Ibid., 184.

[24] Ibid., 199.

[25] Perdue, 271.

These expand options for understanding what communal anxieties and priorities could be conveyed through this wisdom excerpt. Given the characters and subject matter, I am particularly interested in understanding how this pericope engages issues related to social order, including legal and economic practices. Also, given the characters and subject matter, I ask, how do the various sectors represented in the text interact and what implications do such interactions have upon conceptions of optimal societal stability? I divide the pericope into two sections (1-4, 5-9) and treat each verse in order and in detail.

Vv. 1-4: The Quarrel

> 1: "The words of Lemuel, a king, the burden with which she rebuked him, his mother."

Whose words are these, exactly? Lemuel's or his mother's? The Hebrew phrase, *divray Lemuel,* has comparable parallels in biblical texts, including *divray Agur* (30.1)*, divray hamelech, divray YHWH,*[26] and so would seem non-controversial to attribute to Lemuel. Yet the text also says that with these words his *mother* rebuked *him*, so were they hers first? Is he quoting her, summarizing, or merely incorporating some of her thoughts? Several commentators clarify that in this context these are not words spoken *by* Lemuel but *to* Lemuel: "The 'words of Lemuel' are really those of his mother," writes Roland Murphy.[27] Or Yoder: "These are the instructions of his mother."[28] Crenshaw supplies a syntactical explanation: "The genitive relationship in Prov. 31:1 (words of Lemuel) is an objective one (words directed to Lemuel)."[29] Michael Fox straddles the

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[26] Ludwig Koehler, et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 211–212.

[27] Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 26. Also, Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 270.

[28] Yoder, 290.

[29] Crenshaw, 14. This view contradicts the guidance in *The Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* which lists v. 1 as an example of genitive of agency, in which the second word does the action of the first. It translates the phrase, "words by Lemuel." Bruce Waltke and M. O'Conner, *The Introduction to*

options: "Lemuel received them from his mother and spoke them in his own teaching."[30]

As explained in chapter one, any text, due to the nature of language itself, will possess ambiguities, gaps, and multiple options for meanings. Attempting to nail down which one voice is speaking assumes the more common approach to truth that Mikhail Bakhtin labeled "monologic."[31] Surely only one voice could be speaking, it is assumed, and one is enough to express this particular unit of truth. Yet Bakhtin's dialogism conceives of truth as not the resolution of ambiguity into one ultimately correct expression, but as the clash between options wherein multiple perspectives from multiple social locations are recognized as present and permitted to contribute what they perceive to be true.[32] Prov. 31.1-9 *could* have been introduced precisely as, "The words of Lemuel," or instead as, "The words of the queen, mother of Lemuel." As it *is* written, the ambiguity of speaker fulfills Bakhtin's description of a polyphonic text in which an author gives up control of perspective and projects several "consciousnesses" with equal and independent points of view.[33] Carol Newsom writes, "There are many implicit quarrels in the Bible which need only a little prodding to make them explicit."[34] We may approach Proverbs 31 without needing to settle on one voice. Instead we can recognize that the peculiar phrasing of the verse sets up two voices: both Lemuel and his mother holding forth. In the whole of the quarrel is an expression of truth.

Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 143.

[30] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 884.

[31] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263-265.

[32] Mikhail Bakhtin, excerpt from "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 90.

[33] See Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *The Journal of Religion* 76.2 (1996), 295. See also Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 48.

[34] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible," 305.

Issues of Translation

The concept of text as quarrel in Prov. 31.1-9 is enhanced through two key choices in translating v. 1. Translations usually render *massa* as "oracle" and *yasar* as "teach." These choices image, perhaps, an elegant lady dispensing wisdom in dignified tone. As we all know, translations are not formulaically determined but comprise subjective approximations. They are a translator's best judgment of the meaning of words in one language rendered into another, taking into account the context of the passage and relevant assumptions about the worlds producing and interpreting the text. A female speaker, a communication between mother and son: with the parallels to doting Hannah and her treasured Samuel (1 Sam. 1) so frequently invoked by commentators,[35] this context may inspire translators of the superscript to opt for undramatic, unconflicted terms.

However, *yasar* in the piel form, as here, is most commonly translated elsewhere in biblical texts as *chastise, discipline or punish*.[36] For example, Lev. 26.18: "If after all this you will not listen to me, I will add to your *punishings* sevenfold for your sins" or Deut. 21.18: "If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who … will not heed his parents when they *discipline* him…" Deuteronomy's "stubborn and rebellious" son fits at least as well as obedient Samuel as an intertext informing translation/interpretation of Prov. 31.1. As Fox points out concerning the larger context of vv. 1-9, "The tone of urgency here gives the impression that Lemuel has already done wrong and his mother is imploring him to cease."[37] Hence my translation, "she rebuked him, his mother," which reinforces

[35] e.g. Crenshaw, 15, Perdue, 272, Yoder, 291.
[36] Koehler, 418–419.
[37] Fox, 885.

viewing the text as a struggle or quarrel by implying some conflict of opinion over the son's behavior.

Secondly, I translate *massa* as "burden" rather than "oracle" or "Massa," a geographic location.[38] Most commentaries on Proverbs 31 weigh in on the disputed meaning of this word. The difficulty stems from Masoretic markings, which place the athnach after *melech* and point *massa* to link it with its following phrase, rather than allowing it to exist in construct with *melech*. This renders the line literally, "The words of Lemuel, king; the *massa* with which she rebuked him…" However, Crenshaw and others contend the resulting first phrase lacks the requisite article for rendering it a title, as in, "King Lemuel."[39] For this and other syntactical reasons he and many others ignore the Masoretes and translate, "… Lemuel, king of Massa, with which she…"[40] This enables understanding *massa* as referring to an Arabian tribe that is mentioned in other biblical texts.[41]

Another option, recommended by Bruce Waltke and many popular translations, sticks with the Masoretes to render the phrase, "… Lemuel, a king, an oracle that …"[42] Waltke argues for "oracle" as the best translation of *massa* because *massa* also appears in the immediately preceding superscript of Prov. 30.1. There it accompanies the word, *n'um*, which is almost always translated "announcement" or "oracle."[43] *Massa* also introduces proclamations in several prophetic texts, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel,

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[38] According to Sneed, *massa* signifies the prophetic genre. Sneed, 312.

[39] Crenshaw, 14-15. See also Fox, 884.

[40] So McKane, Clifford, Perdue, Fox. Raymond Apple writes: "The solution seems to be to view *massa* as a play on words, as *both* 'message' *and* a place name." Raymond Apple, "The two wise women of Proverbs chapter 31," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39.3 (2011): 178.

[41] Perdue, 269.

[42] Waltke, 501.

[43] Koehler, et al., 639.

Nahum, Habbakuk, Zechariah and Malachi and is usually translated "oracle."[44] Because its message is often unwelcome or difficult, *massa* as "oracle" encompasses the notion of burden or load to be carried, which it sometimes literally means, as in Exod. 23.5: "If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden (*massa*)…" Many translations render *massa* as "burden" when referring to words from God, as, "the *burden* of the LORD." Since Prov. 31.1 lacks the reinforcing *n'um* of 30.1, and the specific phrasing in v. 1 of *massa asher* is unique, I follow the Masoretic pointing but emphasize the substance of the upcoming content by rendering *massa* as "burden." This choice both reflects the tone of the upcoming words and enhances their affinity to prophetic narratives, which involve conflict and confrontation, such as Nathan's parable of the ewe-lamb (2 Sam. 12:1-4) or the wise woman of Tekoa's dispute with her neighbors (2 Sam. 14). These, like Proverbs 31, also address kingly failings.

Interestingly, *massa* (מַשָּׂא) forms a homophone with another word, *massah* (מסה), meaning *quarrel* — notable as the name given to mark the location of the Hebrews' grumbling in the wilderness (Exod. 17.7)). Considering the oral orientation of ancient society, most would receive this poem aurally, not textually. An audience could have heard either word or both, thus indicating a multivocality not only within the text but as received by community as well.

Double Focalization

As mentioned, the peculiar phrasing of v. 1 sets up two voices: both Lemuel and his mother holding forth. This dual attribution allows for two concurrent focalizations.

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[44] However, in these other instances the grammatical construction differs from that in Prov. 31.1, as does the genre. Nowhere else does the phrase, *massa asher* occur. Sneed discusses the prophetic, oracular sense of *massa*, 312.

Mieke Bal notes that whenever anything is expressed, *someone said it*, and that someone ought to be noticed.[45] Unmentioned, unacknowledged, but nonetheless present in this text is the recorder of Lemuel's words, the one who writes, "The words of Lemuel, a king …" This unnamed, unknown scribe is the "external" narrator,[46] who records what Lemuel sees: his mother rebuking him. In this view, Lemuel is the focalizer, the subject, who is focalizing his mother and the burden she thrust upon him; these last two are the focalized objects. At the same time, in writing, "The words of Lemuel…" the external narrator empowers an internal narrator, Lemuel. Lemuel within the text records what his *mother* experiences, which is pain at her son and his poor choices. In this way, Lemuel's mother is the focalizer, the subject, who focalizes her son, the focalized object. Four textual levels interacting: external narrator, internal narrator, focalizer, and objects focalized — such a telescoped focalization produces, like a kaleidoscope, multifaceted angles on the scene. Objects mentioned look one way when read as coming from one focalizer but then appear very different when read as if coming from a different focalizing subject.

This concept resembles the approach recommended by Brenner and Van Dijk-Hemmes of conceiving biblical texts as "dual gendered."[47] By this they mean, in contrast to traditional readings assuming a male orientation, to read texts with both a male and female "voice" and a male and female "readerly attention" in mind.[48] "In many cases, two parallel readings are possible."[49] The advantage of entertaining both is a resulting democratization that enables the mother's portrayal of her son to be responded to in

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[45] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto: U of Toronto, 2009), 21.

[46] Ibid., 18.

[47] Brenner and Van Dijk-Hemmes, 9.

[48] Athalya Brenner, "Figurations of Women in Wisdom Literature," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 56.

[49] Brenner and Van Dijk-Hemmes, 9.

readers' own minds via her son's concurrent portrayal of her speaking, and vice versa. In other words, reading Proverbs 31.2-9 this way amounts to the mother speaking a rebuke and the son relaying a *memory* of rebuke.

Among cognitive theorists, consensus has emerged that that memory is not a "carbon copy of the original experience" but a version of the past reconstructed according to current needs of the one remembering.[50] Bal conceives of memory as a particular type of focalization, consisting of "an act of 'vision' of the past but, as an act, situated in the present of the memory."[51] In Proverbs 31, we may suspect this mixing of the past and present in the adult-like themes of sex and drinking addressed via a scolding tone that seems more appropriate directed toward a child, received with childlike silence by the son. Memories may be incoherent, jumping from scene to scene. The words of Lemuel fit this description.

Scholars have struggled to identify a flow to these verses. Understanding them as recalled memory, perhaps under stress, explains their disjointed nature. They could be a compilation of several corrections given at different points of time, or they could be a distilled version of a longer tongue-lashing. They could be a stream-of-consciousness recall of a son mid-crisis, leaning upon the memory of his mother to decide what his values are and how he should act. As is well known, the Hebrew text does not come with quotation marks or other punctuation. The reader is free to decide, and readers — translators and commentators included — *do* decide when and whether voices change throughout a text or if independent utterances have been lain side by side. Bakhtin argued

[50] Kitty Klein, "Narrative Construction, Cognitive Processing, and Health," in *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. David Herman (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2003), 65.

[51] Bal, 150.

for the juxtaposition of texts constituting a form of dialogism, with one text in proximity responding to another in some way: agreeing, disagreeing, extending, expanding, etc.[52] The translation of Proverbs 31.1-9 above is punctuated to suggest something other than a monologic lecture delivered all at once. Double and single quotation marks, hyphens and other punctuation show how the mother's words could be an assembly of comments, a chorus, all weighing in on the quarrel. The abrupt changes in topic and in subject addressed support this arrangement. Perhaps the identities of speaker and audience will even change as the piece progresses.

Contests of Name, Title, and Position

We have established that Prov. 31.1 introduces a dramatic scene through a multiplicity of voices and focalizations conveying conflict between mother and son. Let us examine how in v. 1 each speaker jockeys for position and influence. The naming of Lemuel forms one means. As Adele Reinhartz explains, a proper name promotes literary characterization in several ways: via etymology or associations with other persons bearing that name, distinguishing one character from others, unifying disparate traits, and so on.[53] No doubt, the proper name is what compels some commentators to assume Lemuel is a real historical person.[54] Etymologically, some hazard from the possible meanings of "belonging to God," or "dedicated to God"[55] that the name refers to Solomon[56] or someone like him. McKane suggests an etymology of "Lim is God," noting that Mari texts mention a deity named Lim.[57] Such associations propel characterization of

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[52] Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," 92.

[53] Adele Reinhartz, *Why Ask My Name? Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 6.

[54] e.g. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 26. Perdue, 269.

[55] Waltke, 502. Apple says, "foolish one" (177).

[56] Perdue, 271. Solomon is said to be the author of Proverbs in 1.1, 10.1, and 25.1.

[57] McKane, 408.

Lemuel as wise in the tradition of eastern wisdom literature, similar to the characterization of Job in his hailing from the land of Uz (Job 1.1).[58] Lemuel also receives a title, *melech,* so perhaps he is a foreign king. Mentioning Lemuel first and assigning forthcoming words specifically to him ("the words of Lemuel") while leaving uncertain the degree to which they borrow from his mother promotes his words and voice over hers. We don't know how heavily Lemuel filters his mother's words before passing them on, but as the external narrator sets up the piece, it is clear that *he* is the one filtering *her*.

Lemuel's mother is not named and consequently forms a blurrier figure in contrast to her son.[59] She also lacks the descriptive, often thought a title, *gebirah* (meaning "great/powerful lady"), which other biblical texts attach to the mothers (or wives) of kings.[60] The effect of this disparity in naming is to promote Lemuel's character, behavior and potential over that of his mother. According to Reinhartz, character anonymity can serve rhetorical aims, among these, to draw attention to complex power relationships,[61] both interpersonal and political. Nonetheless, anonymous characters can still possess distinct identities.[62] Prov. 31.1 distinguishes Lemuel's mother as a character through her identified relation to Lemuel. As mother of a king, she gains by association some degree of status and power. In this she resembles the many unnamed biblical mothers who are usually defined in relation to their male offspring.[63] According to Esther Fuchs, in the

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[58] See Perdue, 269.

[59] Reinhartz comments: "The centrality of the proper name to the perception and construction of identity implies the converse: that the absence of the proper name contributes to the effacement, absence, veiling, or suppression of identity" (9).

[60] e.g. 1 Kings 11.19, 15.13, 2 Kings 10.13, 2 Chron. 15.16, Jer. 13.18, 29.2.

[61] Reinhartz, 72.

[62] Ibid., 3-4.

[63] Ibid., 102.

bible, female characters exist to promote male characters and to express "the wishful thinking, fears, aspirations, and prejudices of their male creators."[64] Fuchs writes, "The patriarchal framework of the biblical story prevents the mother figure from becoming a full-fledged *human* role model, while its androcentric perspective confines her to a limited literary role, largely subordinated to the biblical male protagonists."[65]

Nevertheless, readers play a role in the formation of stereotyped or flat character presentations through their choice whether to accept them as sufficient. Readers can choose to resist limited constructions through assigning more significance and substance to the distinguishing characterizations of females that are present. One way of insisting upon understanding the character of Lemuel's mother as round and relatable is through allowing her a fuller spectrum of tone, emotion, motive, and perspective than is overtly asserted. A king's mother can be violently assertive, as Jezebel (1 Kings 19), or Athaliah (2 Kings 11). Although the mother of Prov. 31.1 is not named or titled, reference to her does occur, significantly, at the very end of the introductory line, a climactic positioning. Although unnamed and untitled, the fundamental essence of her being his mother, the one who bore him, fed him, raised him, upon whom at points in time his very life and welfare depended on, must convey power and even authority. Such factors balance the power dynamics between mother and son. So does the proposition in v. 1 that *she* is the one correcting *him*. Although the narrator may have granted Lemuel final editing rights, her act of assessing and instructing grants to her the "arrogant eye," centralizing and imposing her perspective over his.[66]

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[64] Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," *Semeia* 46 (January 1, 1989), 152.

[65] Ibid., 165.

[66] Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001), 16.

2: “What, my son — and what! son of my womb; and what, son of my vows!?”

An Emotional Outburst

The first word of this mother’s rebuke is *mah*, a common term most often translated, “what.”[67] Waltke takes issue with *mah* commencing a parental instruction. According to him, teachers — parents included — don’t ask; they tell, and so *mah* must actually be a “cognate to an Arabic equivalent, meaning ‘take heed/listen.’”[68] Waltke’s expectations of wisdom literature, the instruction genre in particular, direct him toward interpretive choices that constrain this mother, her words, and any prospect of conflict with her son. For him, v. 2 introduces a tender scene, as he writes: “Appealing to Lemuel’s finer feelings, she motivates him to embrace her teachings.”[69] Other scholars are willing to conceive *mah* idiomatically. Some render it as expressing a word of caution, such as, “No.”[70] Many detect an elision and fill in the missing words with such options as, “What is it with you?”[71] “What are you doing?”[72] “What shall I say to you?”[73] or the sympathetic, “What ails my son?”[74]

In this verse, the first of the pericope’s three Aramaic words occurs: *bar*, meaning “son.”[75] The non-Hebrew language may suggest the authority of international wisdom.[76] According to Yoder, three-fold repetition of *mah* lends urgency.[77] The repetitions could

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[67] Koehler, et al., 550. The Septuagint expands the line, reading: “What … am I to say to you?” (Waltke, 503). This expansion indicates dissatisfaction with the mere *mah*.

[68] Waltke, 504.

[69] Ibid., 507.

[70] Yoder, 291. Clifford takes it as “a call for attention, after which an admonition is given,” 269.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Clifford, 268.

[73] Toy, 539.

[74] Mitchell Dahood, *Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Philology* (Roma: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1963), 60.

[75] Waltke, 504.

[76] Longman, 534.

[77] Yoder, 291.

also constitute a form of stuttering, perhaps a sign of surprise, as if the mother is casting about for the right words to say.

Such efforts suggest a mother in the grip of powerful emotion. Emotions occur in response to unexpected changes from routine.[78] Perdue says the mother is expressing shock.[79] He, though, imagines this being felt at the mere prospect of her son engaging in behavior she disavows, not that he actually is doing so. Thus Perdue also, like Waltke, does not recognize the scene as one of actual conflict; it is rather, only instruction given, possibly on the occasion of a king's ascension to the throne.[80] But this shock could be in response to activity already engaged and observed. Emotion, according to Francoise Mirguet, consists of the combined experience of "a bodily sensation, a cognitive assessment of a situation, and a more affective moment."[81] All three of these may be inferred from this mother's words. According to Patrick Hogan, emotional experiences may be indicated through such bodily actions as emphatic vocalizations, gestures, changes in posture, even perspiration.[82] We can easily imagine these types of actions accompanying this mother's words. She herself refers to her body in saying, *beteny*, "my womb." Perhaps she mentions this because she is actually feeling some painful or sickening sensation in her stomach area. Perhaps she grips her middle.

Many meanings can derive from mention of "womb." As the site where Lemuel first formed and grew, it emphasizes their long history together and, especially coupled with *bar*, recalls the protection and provision of this mother to this son. For most women,

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[78] Patrick Colm Hogan, *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 30.

[79] Perdue, 271.

[80] Ibid., 270.

[81] Francoise Mirguet, "What is an 'emotion' in the Hebrew Bible?" *Biblical Interpretation* 24, No. 4-5 (2016), 444.

[82] Hogan, 3.

particularly in antiquity, sons in the womb involve great pain and risk. At the same time, wombs in the Hebrew Bible are associated with compassion[83] an emotion experienced viscerally in the inner organs. So the mention of womb here in varied ways seems intended to bridge a chasm that has opened between two people who are, at least familially, attached. "Womb" possesses political connotations as well. In a few biblical narratives, they are site of struggle concerning the future fate of nations: Isaac and Esau in Rebekah (Gen. 25.22-26), Perez and Zerah in Tamar (Genesis 38), Pharaoh's preserving Hebrew subjugation through killing baby boys (Exodus 1).[84] So the mother's mention of her womb may signal not just her personal pain but the painful impact of circumstances upon their people as a whole. Her womb supplies the genealogical connection between past and present, and so she may also be invoking tradition and family ties when mentioning her womb.

"Vows" constitutes another keyword here. Scholars have interpreted v. 2 as containing a progression of thought, from the mother addressing Lemuel in the present ("my son"), to referencing him before he was born ("son of my womb,"), and finally, even earlier, to understanding "my vows" as referencing a time before he was conceived, when this mother was thinking of him and longing for him.[85] This interpretation relies on an intertextual connection with 1 Sam. 1.10, where barren Hannah makes a vow that if God will bless her with a son, she will make him a Nazarite. It taps into the biblical motifs of mother yearning and dedication to holiness, but it is only one choice among many that readers could make regarding the intention and significance of the mention of

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[83] Chapman, 110.

[84] Job also expresses concern for the genealogical impact of his misfortune/God's disfavor. (19.17). My thanks to Kenneth Ngwa for pointing me toward fuller significance of *beten*.

[85] Chapman, 121.

vows. Mothers may make many vows, not only, as Hannah, to become pregnant, but also, once pregnant, for a healthy baby, and, when in labor, to be delivered quickly, and, as the child grows, for protection and success. Chapman notes that the v. 2 sequence also parallels God's description to Abraham of Isaac in Gen. 22.2: "Take your son, your only whom you love, Isaac…" She writes, "With each added designation, the bond between parent and child is solidified more firmly."[86]

A Shaming Rebuke

To summarize: this first line of the mother's exclamation conveys strong emotion. When focalized through the mother, it expresses concern, disagreement, and an effort to reconnect with her son. Whatever is coming next, the mother has set up an appeal based upon emotion and an implied obligation of the son to the mother because of her former nurturing and sacrifice as well as the needs of their tribe.[87]

When focalizing these words through Lemuel, as our dialogic understanding of v. 1 permits, how do they look? Fox cites a medieval rabbi who says the mother's vocatives are reminding the son of the pain she has gone through and "pressuring him to give her the attention she deserves."[88] Posing a question and direct address makes an audience aware of another person besides the speaker present in the scene, prompting hearers to anticipate and imagine the response of that other person.[89] The mother's display of emotion constitutes an "eliciting condition"[90] likely to trigger comparable emotions in the

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[86] Ibid., 110.

[87] The distress and drama expressed contrast with other parent-son instructions in Proverbs, such as that of chapter 4, which teaches correct behavior and values without suggesting conflict or that the son is failing his duties.

[88] Fox, 885.

[89] Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 51.

[90] A term Hogan employs.

son. Lemuel hears disapproval and exasperation coming from his mother. As first words go, v. 2 conveys emotion but not substance as to the reason for the emotion. Perdue classifies *mah* as a "rhetorical negative," meaning that it anticipates an obvious answer of, "No," or, "Nothing at all."[91] Understood this way, the words maneuver Lemuel into a submissive, defensive posture in relation to his mother by implying that he ought to have nothing to say; there is no excuse for his behavior.

Here the mother has initiated shame, a corrective action parents take to achieve conformity of behavior. Victor Matthews identifies shaming speech as a primary means by which biblical women defend their personal honor and that of their households.[92] Shaming is a risky strategy; it does not always attain the conformity or connection desired. The mother's effort to reconnect with her son or appeal to him on the basis of what she sees as an unseverable bond must present a dilemma to Lemuel, because separating from parents is a normal part of growing up. Writes Patrick Hogan, "We are deeply attached to our parents when we are very young. We gradually come to be concerned with separating from them. For a long time, our relation to our parents is colored by this need to be someone other than our parents."[93] For this reason, the very words Lemuel's mother invokes to bridge a gap in their relationship can trigger an alternative response in the son. The inner turmoil between loyalty to attached parent and loyal to self can trigger withdrawal, as hiding is the natural response to shame. [94]

The polyaffectivity of mother's pain and son's shame powerfully engage reader

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[91] Perdue, 271.

[92] Victor H. Matthews, "Female Voices: Upholding the Honor of the Household," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24, no. 1 (February 1994), 11.

[93] Hogan, 200.

[94] Warren Kinston, "The Shame of Narcissism," in *The Many Faces of Shame*, ed. Donald L. Nathanson, (New York: Guilford Press, 1987), 223.

interest[95] because humans naturally respond to the emotions of others through generating commensurate emotions.[96] According to Hogan, stories related to attachment, in particular, activate emotional memories in readers[97] due to our universal struggle to differentiate from our own parents. This struggle embeds within us early-childhood memories imbued with "ambivalent, complex, and conflicted" emotions that are "metaphorically parallel to the separation and reunion story."[98] Since in this case the son does not yet know what is behind the emotion, he must brace himself for protection against the unknown. Yet even though mother has not yet articulated the details of her concern, keywords already hint at more than failure to take out the trash. The mention of "king," "burden," "rebuke," "womb," and "vows" all signal that much is at stake politically in the mother's immanent assessment of her son. Tension and suspense join the emotions of anger and shame in this quarreling pair and in the audience alike.

> 3-4: "Do not give to women your *chayil*, or your ways to *machoth* kings."
> "Not for kings, Lemuel, not for kings the drinking of wine, or for princes, beer."

Women and Wine: Doubly Focalized

Lemuel's mother now reveals the reason for her distress expressed in the previous line as she warns her son against women and alcohol. Tension increases because the mention of these two potential pitfalls implies some past behavior necessitating comment but leaves unexplained what (if anything) actually happened and what consequence incurred. With such lines, Proverbs 31 illustrates a common feature of biblical narrative and narrative-like texts. Characterization is rarely explicitly articulated but must be

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[95] Hogan, 10.
[96] Ibid., 3.
[97] Ibid., 187.
[98] Ibid., 203.

inferred, "teased out based on what characters do and what they say."[99]

In v. 3, two ambiguities occur that impact understanding. The first concerns the word *chayil*, which possesses wide semantic range. It can mean wealth, might, property, sexual virility and more.[100] Which meaning does the mother intend here? According to Gale Yee, in Proverbs, economic factors commonly undergird advice for either marrying 'foreign' women or prohibiting the same.[101] *Chayil,* with its economic and sexual connotations, injects anxiety concerning two of Roland Boer's identified survival sources: land and fertility.[102]

The nuance of the mother's meaning impacts character construction of the mother herself. If her focus is on any of the first three meanings supplied above, then readers are more likely to conceive her as a dignified, practical visionary, counseling her son in light of concerns for the long-term strength of her family and the nation. Along such lines John Hartley interprets *chayil* as pointing out that "consorting with many women could prove very costly to him."[103] It could "squander the national wealth," writes Waltke.[104] But if Lemuel's mother intends the latter, sexual, meaning, then this prospect allows for a cruder, more abrasive mother figure than the former meanings allow. If she is saying, "do not give to women your sexual virility," and she is saying such in tones of an angry, emotional outburst, then perhaps the line needs to be rendered into English more like:

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[99] Tod Linafelt, "Narrative and Poetic Art in the Book of Ruth," *Interpretation* 64, no. 2 (April 2010), 118.

[100] Koehler, 311.

[101] Gale A. Yee, "The Other Woman in Proverbs: My Man's not Home; He Took His Moneybag With Him," in *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 108.

[102] Roland Boer, "The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: An International Journal of Nordic Theology*, 21:1 (2007), 39-40.

[103] John E. Hartley, *Proverbs: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2016), 325.

[104] Waltke, 506.

"Don't you go shooting off your sperm!"[105] Sustaining multiple meanings to *chayil* invites crediting the mother herself, not just the narrator, with the cleverness of this double entendre.

The second ambiguity in v. 3 is *machoth*. Some scholars mark it an unresolvable textual corruption, many guess based on similar foreign words and come up with "seers," "food," or "daughters of kings." Influenced by the feminine plural ending and conventions of parallelism, most translations emend *machoth* to produce "destroyers of," an infinitive construct of *machah*, "to ruin, to wipe out."[106] While a feminine plural ending to a noun does not necessarily indicate the noun itself to be a female entity (as multiple gendered nouns attest), this translation gains credence when compared to Prov. 30.20. Like 31.3, this verse employs *derek* ("ways") in proximity to *machah*: "This is the way (*derek*) of an adulterous woman: she eats and wipes (*machatah*) her mouth, and says, "I have not done wrong." With this image in mind, it could be that part (b) of v. 3 develops part (a) by clarifying a certain type of woman to guard against, such as an adulteress, or by supplying a reason not to get involved with women at all, such as that they will "wipe them out" or "away." William McKane recommends an emendation to *derek* in 31.3 that would render for it a meaning of "thighs," thus paralleling semantically the sexual innuendo of *chayil*.[107] *Derek*, like *chayil,* also has economic connotations; it can mean "business" or "enterprise."[108] So part (b) of verse 3 parallels part (a) in binding sexuality and women with economic concerns. For McKane the overall meaning of the

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[105] "*… do not waste your semen on women other than your wife…"* So Hilary Lipka, "Masculinities in Proverbs: An Alternative to the Hegemonic Ideal," in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*, ed. Ovidiu Creagna and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 89, n. 10.

[106] Koehler, et al., 567–568.

[107] McKane, 409. Also Waltke, 507; Fox, 885.

[108] Koehler, et al., 232.

line amounts to: "When a king is too obsessed with women, his wits are blunted and his judgment goes awry."[109]

Scholars associate the warning here with the biblical stories of David and Solomon, kings who compromised their reigns through their engagements with women.[110] *Chayil* will come up again in v. 10 as the key adjectival modifier introducing the idealized woman of vv. 10-31. It is the first of several key words shared by these two poems. In v. 10, too, options for meaning impact perceptions as to what priorities are being expressed, whether hard work, wealth, loyalty, virility, etc. It is interesting that in v. 3, *chayil* is invoked to warn against women, but in v. 10, to recommend a certain type of woman. This dual use is not contradictory, however, because in v. 3 it is the male's *chayil* that must be guarded, and in v. 10, the woman's *chayil* that must be obtained, and by men. Whatever *chayil* means in either verse, a male addressee is being counseled to pursue his own best advantage when it comes to women.

From these and other observations we may draw some conclusions related to the character construction of Lemuel and his mother. According to his mother's focalization: Lemuel is wayward, or there would be no need to correct him as v. 3-4 can be understood to do. He must be lacking in self-control and too taken with a partying lifestyle, hence the caution about women and wine (3-4). Readers may rightfully infer Lemuel to be foolish, not realizing the potential consequences of excessive consumption. Taking the initiative to instruct, as Lemuel's mother does, suggests that the one instructed is unqualified to lead. Yet the willingness to correct shows faith in the other's potential. Ultimately Lemuel is, to this mother, still destined to rule.

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[109] McKane, 409.
[110] Yoder, 291.

Focalization reveals a perspective not only of the object, but of the focalizing subject as well.[111] This mother is grossly generalizing with her "stay away from women, don't drink alcohol" advice, as communities do need men to mate with women; alcohol is commonly consumed. While such generalizing comments may be typical for wisdom proverbs, within the story of this scene, her lack of tempering reinforces the impression of v. 2 that she is not entirely in control of her words, emotions, or thoughts. In these verses, Lemuel's mother reveals a belief in her own influence, otherwise she would not bother to speak. She shows herself to be not only devoted to her son's wellbeing, but to possess political investment, as she turns from referring to Lemuel with the personal term of "my son" to abstractly referencing "kings."

Within a dialogic understanding of this multivocal text, Lemuel as narrator reporting his mother's focalization of him is joined by the external narrator also reporting Lemuel focalizing his mother. In vv. 2-4, Lemuel records his mother three times referring to him as "son" and also three times mentioning "kings."[112] The shift in label from "son" to "king" may be instructive as to what circumstances influence Lemuel's memory of his mother. Is Lemuel experiencing some conflict of identity between his duties as a son and as a king? This seems doubtful, as his mother's appeals to him as a son are not directed against his obligations as king but toward making him a better king. It could be that Lemuel, fully a king, is facing some new challenge he feels uncertain about. As Doreen Massey has pointed out, it is not uncommon for males to idealize a mother figure "not as herself a living person engaged in the toils and troubles and pleasures of life, not actively

[111] Bal, 156.

[112] *Melachim* twice and a less common term, *rezanim*, which appears elsewhere in parallel with kings, perhaps meaning "princes" or "rulers."

engaged in her own and others' history, but a stable symbolic centre — functioning as an anchor for others."[113] Any crisis could provoke reflection on a mother's teachings because of the safety and security of home that she symbolizes. In Lemuel's case, remembering his mother could serve as a self-soothing mechanism, enabling him to transition from an agitated state of self-blame, represented through his mother's voice accusing him of weaknesses and inadequacy, to a state of calm and confidence in principled *noblesse oblige*, as the pericope's final verses express. Nathanson reports that to be healthy, people have to be able to tolerate and manage negative feelings.[114] Proverbs 31.1-9 could illustrate one man's process for doing so.

So what was it like for Lemuel to experience his mother's rebuke? While we cannot know his posture or response, our recognizing that these words are a son's memory of rebuke holds profound implications. Lacking background context, we don't actually know that Lemuel is wayward, wanton, foolish, unqualified or any other characteristic implied. Perhaps on a personal level the mother's worry derives from paranoia or jealousy over opportunities denied to her. Lemuel may indeed have justly provoked a reproach, or he may be experiencing an entirely unfair and uncalled for verbal assault.

The book of Proverbs contains many graphic references to sexual activity.[115] That the mother makes her son's sexual activity the subject of her criticism could be humiliating and shaming for Lemuel, as, according to psychologist Silvan Tomkins, sexuality is commonly shrouded with shame, which functions as a protective

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[113] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 180.
[114] Kinston, 220.
[115] e.g. Proverbs 5-7.

mechanism.[116] Furthermore, the manner in which the mother discusses Lemuel's sexual activity, having employed in v. 2 emotion-laden language to remind him of *their* bond, pre-existing any other woman's, could suggest an overstepping of boundaries. Kirk-Duggan goes so far as to compare the overtones in vv. 2 and 3 to Sophocles's *Oedipus* saga.[117] Following her commentary on sexual behavior with mention of alcohol even increases a context of shame, as psychologist Donald Nathanson has noted a connection between shaming family systems and substance abuse, with people suffused with shame often turning to the bottle as a "shame killer."[118] Parents should guard against projecting expectations onto their children in the way Lemuel's mother does, writes Kirk-Duggan.[119] The impression of being only acceptable if fulfilling parental expectations[120] foments within children an acute anxiety about abandonment. The relationship becomes painful for the child due to having to choose between being true to self, thereby causing pain to a beloved parent, or complying with parental desire, but thereby betraying the self.[121] This observation applied to Proverbs 31 illustrates how fitting it is for the external narrator to depict the mother's words to her son as "burden" (v.1).

If Lemuel experiences his mother's attack as perhaps unfair, or shaming, or invasive, how does he respond? The silence of the text allows many possibilities: Perhaps his repetition of her words constitutes his own assent to her assessment. Or perhaps his recall forms his own womb-like space in which to engage the struggle to understand his

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[116] Silvan S. Tomkins, "Shame," in *The Many Faces of Shame*, ed. Donald L. Nathanson, (New York: Guilford Press, 1987), 156.

[117] Kirk-Duggan, 105.

[118] Donald L. Nathanson, "Shaming Systems in Couples, Families, and Institutions," in *The Many Faces of Shame*, ed. Donald L. Nathanson, (New York: Guilford Press, 1987), 266.

[119] Kirk-Duggan, 102

[120] Kinston, 222-223.

[121] Ibid., 227.

role and duties. The text contains abrupt shifts in topic and in persons addressed, signals of interruption that can occur when a character is experiencing inner discord.[122] The shifts in topic and in person addressed could also indicates the words that are present serving as one half of a conversation in which silence *is* the contribution of the other half.

Cynthia Miller argues that silence itself is a communicative response, both in common conversations and in dialogue recorded in biblical narratives.[123] According to her analysis of biblical texts, what silence communicates will depend upon to whom the silence is attributed: narrator or character.[124] If the narrator outside the narrative, then it implies the character's cooperation with the sentiment or command expressed. But if it is the character who responds with silence, then that silence ought to be taken as unwillingness to assent.[125] Within our polyphonic text, if either narrator (Lemuel or the unnamed scribe) is the one expected to respond but remains silent instead, then such silence would imply consent to the mother's words. Perhaps Lemuel over time has come to see their wisdom. However, if it is Lemuel the character within the narrative snippet responding with silence, then such, according to Miller's theory, would imply his lack of cooperation. Perhaps the value of remembering this rebuke and silent response is to anticipate some new value system in verses to come.

Riad Aziz Kassis has grouped several types of silence occurring in Proverbs, including expressions of respect, of ignorance, response to fools, concealment of

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[122] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Dostoyevsky's Dialogue," *Soviet Literature* 2 (1971), 135.

[123] Cynthia L. Miller, "Silence as a Response in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: Strategies of Speakers and Narrators," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 32 no. 1 (2006), 23. Also Sneed: Silence "is an active virtue which stops quarrel and combat," 274.

[124] Miller, 41.

[125] Ibid.

information, compassion for the poor and strategic advantage.[126] Lemuel's silence may constitute respect, a reflection of his younger years, when silence served as the socially conditioned appropriate response to an elder's words. Or it could signal ignorance, when a young Lemuel was developmentally not yet capable of articulating anywhere near to the degree of the parent's sophistication. Silence here could also be considered a response to fools, the withdrawal of an adolescent or young man who has concluded the parent wouldn't listen and does not care about his point of view anyway. According to psychologist Warren Kinston, dependent children sometimes feel a deep need to protect their parents, even from realizing the harm they are doing to their own children. This impulse is based on the unconscious reasoning that if anything happens to the parent, the child will be even worse off without them.[127] In such cases, instead of lashing back, children often lower their eyes when experiencing shame or humiliation so that the parent will not see the hostility they are feeling.[128] "In most families," Kinston writes, "a child learns to suffer humiliation in silence."[129] Interpreted this way, Lemuel's silence would constitute a strategic response. Such behavior patterns can persist between parents and their adult offspring.

The Mother's Work Is Never Done

Douglas Knight writes, "every social group needs to establish and maintain some type of orderly existence for itself."[130] Parents raise their children to practice certain behaviors and avoid others according to perceived needs and threats, for example, the

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[126] Riad Aziz Kassis, *The Book of Proverbs and Arabic Proverbial Works* (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 1999), 148.

[127] Nathanson, 254.

[128] Ibid., 252-3.

[129] Ibid., 254.

[130] Douglas A. Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 31.

need for food, shelter, boundaries, and reproduction, and the threat of foreign invasion or famine.[131] Poems are one means of passing on such values. Regarding Proverbs 31, conditions similar to what we imagine may motivate Lemuel within the world of this text to remember his mother may also motivate the Persian-era community outside the text. For those developing and meditating on it, the mother likely for them also symbolized home, elevating the importance of whatever concerns are being surfaced and linking them with home, security, and the group to which one belongs. Mothers function as a child's first teacher and authority. The pain Lemuel's mother expresses in response to her son's implied behavior may function to deter readers from actions that would negatively affect their own social group. Rebuke coming from a mother injects the element of shame into readers identifying with Lemuel due to the ancient Near Eastern conception of honor as intersection of authority, gender status, and respect.[132] A woman's rebuke decreases honor, potentially motivating invested onlookers, the reading audience, to act in some way as to regain it again. According to Sneed, rhetoric in the ancient world appealed either to reason, passion or authority.[133] As the words of a mother, vv. 2-9 contain all three rhetorical elements, a powerful triple whammy of persuasion.

The text's focalization encourages readers to identify with Lemuel and his mother, both rulers, both elite. The mother's language contains a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, which perhaps reflects the hybrid nature of local elites. The focalization of a king and a king's mother indulges a Yehudite fantasy, as that Persian colony no longer ruled but were ruled themselves. Nonetheless hierarchies remained at local and regional

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[131] Ibid., 32.

[132] As explained by Zeba Crook, "Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009), 592.

[133] Sneed, 243.

levels. Access to written instruction secured membership in the elite.[134] In a largely illiterate society, those possessing the ability to read and write held tremendous influence over how people think and act. They are the ones writing things down, shaping ideas into the form that will become authoritative. These educated are the ones called upon to read, interpret, and teach to others. Lemuel, in recording the words of his mother, acts as a role model to his own audience, who are not only learning communal values through his writing but also witnessing the act of developing and perpetuating those values through writing.

As to the actual communal concerns surfaced through the mother's rebuke, the fact that she and Lemuel may be non-Yehudites, and that Lemuel seems to need correction and guidance, indicates some concern about the ability of foreign powers to rule effectively. However, the choice to identify Lemuel via an otherwise unattested name allows readers to implicitly critique either foreign rulers or local elites. If readers associate Lemuel with King Solomon, then such critique requires a negative cultural memory of Solomon or former Israelite kings in general — as ample biblical narratives convey.

The mother's concern betrays the tenuousness of social organization. The scene portrays as natural a hierarchy of rulers and ruled and yet also conveys that some behaviors could undermine this king's rule. The repetition inherent in parallelism (v. 2-4) produces an effect of insecurity, as if saying something once will not convince. If a king can be undone, then perhaps the status quo is not as permanent or essential as those in power would like to project. This drives home a message that local elites must watch

[134] Johanna Stiebert, "The people's Bible, Imbokodo and the King's Mother's Teaching of Proverbs 31," *Biblical Interpretation* 20.3 (2012), 261-262.

themselves, be careful. Yet commencing her lecture via the question, "What —?" invites others to weigh in on questions that the open-ended, "what," might initiate, such as, what *is* a ruler's obligation to others? What *are* the risks of his behavior? How ought we best organize? Communal "others," with different experiences and interests, will have varying answers to these questions.

The mother's mention of women and alcohol hints at the tenuousness of access to resources. *Chayil*'s connotations of wealth, property, and honor: all of these could be understood by hearers as at risk if men are not careful in their choices. Earlier portions of Proverbs portray women of *zara* — "strange" or, more likely, "foreign"[135] — as a threat.[136] Possible reasons include their competing with female Yehudites for husbands, or because their customs, religions, and languages could dilute communal identity. The impact of foreign wives upon land inheritance also seems to be at issue.[137] Although Proverbs 31 does not contain the actual word, *zara*, we can assume that intertextual familiarity amongst the literati would bring that reference to this text, resulting in hearers thinking either that Lemuel's mother, too, is warning against foreign women, or that women in general are just as suspect as those foreign women warned about elsewhere. On the other hand, if the mother's use of the Aramaic, *bar*, "son," indicates her non-Yehudite status, then perhaps the text is promoting Lemuel's mother as another Ruth, who, though Moabite, showed such *chesed* to Israel she deserved praise alongside Rachel and Leah. Perhaps this foreign mother, too, is an *eshet chayil* (Ruth 3.11).

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[135] Koehler, et al., 279.

[136] Prov. 2:16, 5:3, 5:20, 7:5, 22:14, 23:33. Also Ezra-Nehemiah.

[137] Harold Washington, "The Strange Woman of Proverbs 1-9 and Post-Exilic Judean Society," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature,* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 173.

The concerns that Lemuel's mother mentions are likely not exhaustive — only representative. In warning against women, the mother gives no attention to whether her son cares for any one in particular. But the emotion and argumentative tone she displays suggest via "sideways glance"[138] that she expects him to argue her point. Lemuel evidently has crossed boundaries and violated the social norms that his mother believes in, thus provoking her words. Their quarrel surfaces debate concerning the intersection of personal pleasure and communal duty.

A final work of these verses concerns gender identity construction. This occurs as readers identify with gendered characters and associate the characters' words and actions with those genders. It is a complicated process, according to Ovidiu Creanga, involving "social norms, expectations, ideologies, and biases ingrained in each culture regarding what is an 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' man or woman…"[139] As Carol Meyers warns, biblical texts often do not reflect the reality of women's presence and influence.[140] Male authors portray their world according to what matters to them, which results in a lack of detail concerning women's lives and a lack of female testimony about their worlds. Despite such distortion, these texts shape readers and the societies they live in as readers imbibe biblical portrayals of gender.

To consider first the impact of the depiction of Lemuel's mother: Her primary gender trait corresponds to her label, that she is a *mother*. She centers her focus on her

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[138] According to Bakhtin, every thought a character has is not simply focused on its topic, but "is accompanied by a continual sideways glance at another person." Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 32.

[139] Ovidiu Creanga, *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded,* eds. Ovidiu Creanga and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Phoenix Press 2014), 5.

[140] Carol Meyers, "Double Vision: Textual and Archaeological Images of Women," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 5.2 (2016), 113.

son, giving the impression within the textual world that her life *is* her son, she has no other outside of him. The passion and pain expressed by the mother concerning Lemuel aligns with Fuchs' description of the typical biblical depiction of motherliness as "highly selfish … mostly focused on one's own child."[141] Mignon Jacobs' reflection concerning Bathsheba applies here as well: "To the extent that she influences her son, the king's mother is a leader within the family and the political domain."[142]

Actions also construct gender. This mother advises her son and does so independently of any man. As such, she cultivates an understanding of females as possessing influence, if not authority. Perhaps her aforementioned lack of title influences the manner in which this woman advises: through emotional display and appeal to family ties. They model a means of exercising power in situations where authority is denied. They also cultivate a belief that women can change men if only they will make themselves vulnerable and plead. Such tactics could constitute the quality of *chen* to be discussed in chapter four regarding v. 30. When employed by a female, they thereby associate those qualities with femaleness.

Lemuel's mother is not the only presentation of femaleness within the text. The reference to those women whom Lemuel should stay away from impacts gender construction. That he should keep his distance reinforces notions of ancient masculinity identified by David Clines, including that men should bond with other men, and not women.[143] Diane Bergant claims the mother is colluding with systemic oppression in

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[141] Fuchs, 163.

[142] Mignon R. Jacobs, "Mothering a Leader : 1 Kings 1-2's Portrayal of Bathsheba as Model of Relational and Functional Identities," in *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), 67.

[143] David Clines, "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible," in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 225-227.

promoting views of women that are "blatantly androcentric and discriminatory."[144] With the possible parallel of "destroyers of kings," these women are focalized negatively, as if they are a threat. At the same time, in warning against women, even only a certain type of women, the text ascribes to women significant power. Their bodies produce the next generation, as do their pedagogies and strategies for living. In their activity and resources they impact their communities, for help or for harm.

As for male gender identity, this text cultivates the notion that all worlds center around males. Males act, and their actions are the ones that matter and the ones that both men and women should be concerned about. A man, according to this text, possesses *chayil*, or ought to, with all its connotations: wealth, strength, virility. At the same time, the fact that Lemuel needs to be warned implies weakness, a vulnerability to making poor choices. Resisting women and alcohol fits with the hegemonic ideal of masculinity involving self-discipline and self-control.[145] According to Stephen Moore, the ancient expectation upon males to exert self-control went hand in hand with the expectation also of dominating others.[146] Such may explain the logic behind this mother's integrating of Lemuel's need to resist temptations with mention of his role as ruler.

Abilities in persuasive speech constitute another feature of ancient conceptions of masculinity.[147] "… [W]ords can be expressions of the masculine imperative to dominate," writes Moore.[148] Lemuel's prowess here is complicated by the fact that even though as narrator he does speak ("the words of Lemuel…" v. 1), what he relays is his

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[144] Diane Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 98-99.

[145] Lipka, 90.

[146] Stephen Moore, "Final Reflections on Biblical Masculinity," in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creanga (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 247.

[147] Clines, 219.

[148] Moore, 248.

mother's words, filtered to some unknown degree. In this he is exhibiting "logocentricity," which Creanga defines as "the circular power and prestige that biblical men acquire through being institutionally privileged over women to speak in public gatherings, usually at critical moments in the life of the Israelite community."[149] Through such practice and its presence in texts, men and women are socialized to accept as normal male censoring and control over women's language. Recognizing polyphony in the text, however, reveals that practice to be only partially successful. The mother's rebuke conveys a norm about women as instructors, strategists, and custodians of social memory, tradition, and praxis.[150]

Vv. 5-9: The Counsel

In vv. 1-4, readers witness an outburst, snippet of a quarrel between a mother and her royal son. In each character, we perceive lack and desire: mother lacking harmony, security, desiring connection with her son, to influence him, secure his safety, perhaps see her labors bear fruit in a more tempered life. Lemuel, for whom his mother's words are a "burden," and whose behavior is suspect, lacks connection with his mother, lacks wisdom concerning correct choices and how to be a proper king. His remembering and reciting/recording his mother's words suggests desire to wring some truth from them and be a proper king. The initial interpersonal conflict between mother and son, having hooked readers' interest, propels them in vv. 5-9 into a second, more complicated communal conflict between societal "haves" and "have-nots."

> 5: "… Lest he should drink and forget the decrees and change the verdict of the sons of oppression."

[149] Creanga, 6.
[150] Kenneth Ngwa, personal correspondence.

Verse 5 begins this shift, as Lemuel's mother expands upon her critique of her son's drinking while identifying a new focalized object: the *b'nay-oni*, literally "sons of oppression/misery."[151] The line introduces the concept of class, contrasting kings with the *b'nay-oni.* Boer's explanation of class helps to understand the organization of ancient society alluded to here: "… a certain group is disconnected from the production of essential items for survival such as food and clothing. This class then relies on those who do produce these essentials and must extract it from them in some fashion, whether by coercion or persuasion or some mix of the two …"[152] In referencing, "sons," the mother shifts her vocabulary from the earlier Aramaic, *bar,* in referencing her own son (v. 2), to the Hebrew, *ben.* This could suggest correspondence between the king/mother being foreign, since he is referred to via a Persian-sanctioned language,[153] and the "sons of oppression" being local peasants. According to Johannes Ro, Hebrew was not the common language of Yehud, but the exclusive language of the elite.[154] *B'nay-oni* therefore may be not how peasants referred to themselves but how they were characterized by the elite. The two synonyms set up some connection between her own son and his position ("my womb") and that of the lower class (oppression/misery).

In v. 5, the singular form of the subject pronoun, "he," surprises, because the immediately preceding verse contains a plural subject: "kings." Crenshaw explains this shift as perhaps to maintain focus on her son alone.[155] It also continues the impression of

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[151] Koehler, et al., 856.
[152] Boer, 36.
[153] Nicola Denzey Lewis, "What Was the Original Language of the Bible?", n.p. [cited 24 Jan 2019]. Online: https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/tools/bible-basics/what-was-the-original-language-of-the-bible
[154] Johannes Un-Sok Ro, "Socio-Economic Context of Post-Exilic Community and Literacy," *Zeitschrift fȍr die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 120.4 (2008), 604.
[155] Crenshaw, 17.

previous lines that this mother's words are not a calm, prepared expression, but more stream-of-consciousness emission in herky-jerky style.

In v. 5 the mother also introduces two of the several legal terms that will inform the verses to follow: "forget the decrees" and "change the verdict." Fox notes that two distinct concerns are being expressed: first, that a drunken judge will forget the laws and render a faulty verdict, and second, that a drunken judge will unfairly change a verdict already made.[156] To aid in interpretation, he cites a comparable Sumerian phrase: "When you are drunk, do not judge!"[157] According to Boer's conception of the ancient economy involving tension between systems of allocation and extraction, the judiciary functioned to manage allocation.[158] Such oversight, as indicated by the content of laws in the Hebrew Bible, concerned allocation of land, behavior of women, kinship, inheritance, and patron-client relations.[159] The mother's comment in v. 5 acknowledges rulers' participation in the judiciary while also voicing both the fears and, most likely, actual experiences of the exploited class.

Concern for her son's wellbeing appears to be Lemuel's mother's primary concern in vv. 1-4, but the mention in v. 5 of legal action and oppressed people justifies rethinking the mother's motives, even in her earlier commentary on women (v. 3). In writing about Proverbs 7, Alice Ogden Bellis notes that similar warnings elsewhere in Proverbs are not necessarily androcentric.[160] Male promiscuity would benefit males in terms of pleasure and honor but harm women through reducing or straining their received

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[156] Fox, 887.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Boer, 41.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Alice Ogden Bellis, "The Gender and Motives of the Wisdom Teacher in Proverbs 7" *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996), 17.

support.[161] Therefore, the mother's counsel "against" women in v. 3 could constitute an attempt to protect women and promote community stability, but expressed in a way that cleverly emphasizes the benefit to the king also of said policy. Perhaps the line is the mother's own way of opening her mouth for the speechless, as she will soon advise her son to do (v. 8).

> 6-7: " 'Give beer to the perishing,
> and wine to the bitter of soul' —
> Let *him* drink and forget his poverty;
> let *him* not remember his toil anymore."

Verses 6 and 7 continue the shift in focus, describing the *b'nay-oni* with two new terms: "perishing," and "bitter of soul." To modern ears the advice to ply them with beer and wine sounds callous. We are accustomed to a vast array of medical, therapeutic, social and political remedies to suffering. Some point out that in antiquity, alcohol was the only medicine available for relieving physical pain, not only effective, but pleasurable,[162] perhaps comparable to contemporary opinions about medical and recreational cannabis. So the mother's advice may be intended as compassionate. Others find it cynical, showing no faith at all in improving conditions of the marginalized.[163] Nzimande condemns the line as a particularly egregious example of post-colonialism. Supplying alcohol to the poor is a well-known strategy for disempowering colonized people, she writes.[164] To Nzimande, the "Queen Mother" is not an advocate for justice but rather "a mouthpiece of the oppressive and exploitative status quo."[165] Johanna Stiebert concurs: "This is decidedly not a suggestion that acknowledges the humanity and

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[161] Ibid., 20.
[162] McKane, 410.
[163] Yoder, 289.
[164] Nzimande, 194.
[165] Ibid., 193.

dignity of a fellow human being…"[166]

Taken straight, the mother's advice does seem merely to assume, as Fox interprets, that poverty and misery are permanent aspects of the human condition.[167] But reading the verses in light of the emotionalism of previous verses suggests a different tone. Waltke says the remark can only be understood as sarcastic, because to take it literally would produce a meaning "completely out of harmony with wisdom."[168] Along those lines, Tremper Longman imagines the underlying sentiment of the mother's sarcasm to be: "Don't act like those derelicts who drink to forget their hardships. Act like the king you are."[169]

In polyphonic texts, sometimes one voice will invoke another as reinforcement, creating a "dialogic of agreement."[170] Bakhtin utilized Charles Dickens to illustrate how texts are crowded with the quotations of others.[171] Verse 6 changes its address from the second person singular — addressing Lemuel — to a plural imperative: "Give…" Because of this, some scholars consider verse 6 to be an insertion into the mother's lecture of a traditional communal proverb.[172] According to Fontaine, proverb citation is a social strategy of persuasion that offers clarifying appraisal in an ambiguous situation.[173] With this in mind, it could be that after imploring Lemuel on the basis of their relationship, his mother now feels the need to reinforce her opinion with a communal

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[166] Stiebert, 277.
[167] Fox, 887.
[168] Waltke, 508.
[169] Longman, 539.
[170] Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin," in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A.K.M. Adam (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2000), 23-24.
[171] Bakhtin, "Discourse," 307.
[172] Fox, 887.
[173] Carole R. Fontaine, "The Proof of the Pudding: Proverbs and Gender in the Performance Arena," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29, no. 2 (Dec 2004), 182-183.

point of view. It is a type of saying, "and it's not just I who thinks so!"

In analyzing proverb utterances, Katheryn Darr identifies three relevant contextual factors: "(1) the proverb cited; (2) the entire utterance in which the proverb appears; and (3) the occasion on which the proverb is performed, including the specific situation to which it refers."[174] In receiving v. 6 as a communal proverb invoked to reinforce an argument, I, like Waltke, also take vv. 6-7 as sarcastic, but with a different implication than Longman conceives. '*Give beer to the perishing, and wine to the bitter of soul.'* As a communal proverb, independent of the context here, this line encapsulates the hopelessness and fatalism of powerless people, reflecting a cynical belief that those in power don't understand or care about them, an ancient version of, "Let them eat cake." However, inserting this proverb as part of the mother's last and sharpest dig against her son produces a new meaning. According to Darr, contrasts are an important feature of proverbs, but a contrast is not always explicitly stated; sometimes it is implied.[175] Within the context of the mother's speech overall, we must infer a meaning something more like, "It would be better to supply alcohol to those poor wretches than for you to drink it, because at least their forgetting has an upside, whereas your forgetting would cause all sorts of harm."

This interpretation of the remark does not rehabilitate Lemuel's mother in light of Nzimande's critique. We must grant that the mother isn't concerned here first and foremost about justice for the poor. To some extent, she is merely invoking them to drive home a point to her son. Whatever her intention, citing this communal proverb adds new

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[174] Katheryn Darr, "Asking at Abel: A Wise Woman's Performance in 2 Samual 20," in *From the Margins 1*, eds. Peter Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (Sheffield: Sheffield Cushing Press, 2009), 110.

[175] Ibid.

voices and perspectives to the text. Even as the mother attempts to create for her son an inspiring vision of kings behaving justly, she brings to the discussion a depiction of kings doing just the opposite, if they were to actually follow her advice. And the double-voicedness extends even further back in meaning. Waltke has noted that in this verse the word translated, "perishing," is most frequently used in the Hebrew Bible to describe the "devastating, destructive" end that God inflicts on the wicked.[176] Elsewhere in Proverbs, it is always used pejoratively.[177] Therefore the proverb, while expressing a cynical view of rulers, through this word choice also inserts a cynical attitude toward the poor, one that does not identify or sympathize with them but blames them for their plight.

Still yet another meaning in v. 5 does allow for a justice orientation, and one that does more than merely numb the suffering of the poor. This one understands the mother's mention of "wine" and "beer" as a reference to the luxury crops the estate-managing elite coerced peasants to grow for tribute or trade to the empire rather than crops they could personally eat. These products were exported from the area. In urging her son to give these luxury goods to the poor, Lemuel's mother holds him accountable for their poverty and argues that a change in his policy could improve them, enabling them to "forget" their situation, taking "forget" in the sense of "abandoning," or "leaving behind."[178] Peeling away the layers of meaning in these lines reflects Bakhtin's "nonsystematic, nonabstract, nonreductive emphasis on unmerged voices in the text."[179]

> 8-9: "Open your mouth for the speechless,
> on behalf of all who are perishing.
> Open your mouth -- judge rightly!
> Plead the case of the oppressed and needy."

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[176] Waltke, 505.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Koehler, et al., 1489.
[179] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible," 306.

In verses 8 and 9, the shift in focalized object has now fully turned from the son's errant behavior/memory of his mother's rebuke toward treatment of the poor. A notable shift in tone occurs as well, from the sarcasm of "give beer to the perishing" to an exhortative, even exultant, "open your mouth for the speechless!" Markedly less emotional, more focused on kingly duty than bad behavior, these verses could be the son's fantasized response to the memory of his mother's harping, what he wishes she had taught him and cared about rather than the criticism he received. Or we can think of these as if the mother's initial rebuke served as catharsis, allowing time and space for the reasoning capabilities of her prefrontal cortex to activate and express a more reasoned counsel. Here, as opposed to earlier, we can more accurately understand and evaluate her perspective on and plans for the poor.

In "Poverty in the Book of Proverbs: Looking from Above?" Eben Scheffler takes on a characterization of poverty in the Old Testament as representing the elite, self-serving perspective of ancient Israel's wisdom teachers, one that does not benefit the poor.[180] Scheffler argues that Proverbs, at least, displays diverse perspectives on the poor, and those advocated by the two women of Proverbs 31 can serve as inspiring examples in efforts to combat poverty.[181] Yet, as mentioned earlier, Nzimande ascribes to Proverbs 31 nefarious intent, writing that the king's mother, with a "hidden agenda to maintain hegemonic royal interests"[182] both trivializes the plight of the poor[183] and pretends to care about them while she "covertly silences their struggles."[184] A more detailed analysis of

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[180] Eben Scheffler, "Poverty in the book of Proverbs: looking from above?" *Scriptura (Online)* 111 (2012), 480.

[181] Ibid., 493.

[182] Nzimande, 229.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Ibid., 186.

Lemuel's words can assist with resolving the differing perspectives between Nzimande and Scheffler.

Verses 8 and 9 contain four words describing those whom Lemuel is instructed to support: *ileym,* "speechless," *ben-chaloph*, "perishing," *ani*, "oppressed," and *evyon,* "needy." The previous three verses contain five more: *b'nay-oni*, "sons of the oppressed," *oved*, "perishing," *marey-nephesh*, "bitter of soul," *rish*, "misery," and *amal*, "toil." The distinctions among these words are difficult to discern. All circle around some type of suffering and deprivation.[185] Connotations may include lacking property, being orphans, and teetering on the brink of death. McKane takes *'ileym* (v. 8) to mean those who are literally mute ("… obviously grievously handicapped in any legal proceedings in which they may be involved"),[186] while for Waltke, it is a metaphor for those who for whatever reason cannot defend themselves in court.[187] For Fox, the sense of being "about to expire" that attaches to "perishing" (v. 6, 8) could include all people, thus expanding the reference beyond the materially poor.[188]

Whatever their specific definitions, that Lemuel's mother uses here a plethora of descriptives is significant. It suggests that human lack has many causes and forms. It depicts a struggle on the part of Lemuel's mother, or (remembering our telescoping narrative lens) Lemuel through his memory of his mother (or the nameless, unknown scribe recording Lemuel), to adequately define and depict this class of people. It is as if the first term — "oppressed ones" — is not sufficient, so another is tried, and then another, and so on. This fits a characteristic that Bakhtin noted in polyphonic texts,

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[185] Longman, 535.
[186] McKane, 411.
[187] Waltke, 509.
[188] Fox, 888.

translated into English as "unfinalizability."[189] Whereas a monologic text "pretends to be the ultimate word,"[190] polyphonic texts signify that in dialogue there is always more to say about situations and persons concerned.[191] In vv. 8 and 9, the repeated descriptions of people of lack make possible a means for their reality and experience to be understood in conveying that no description of them actually suffices. As both the mother's vocabulary and the repetition convey, this class is not represented. Still, the many attempts to do so can be taken as a centrifugal attempt that approaches a better accuracy than what would be achieved through one descriptive alone. Furthermore, the many attempts to capture the reality of these lives invites still more tries beyond the text supplied. In this way the text conveys heteroglossia, sounding both the voice of an aristocrat and that of those she rules.

A second example of aggregative style in vv. 5-9 concerns legal terminology: "decree," "verdict," "open your mouth," "judge rightly," and "plead the case." All of these terms involve speaking. They bring to mind the judicial activities of a court setting, where public argumentation is employed either to condemn or defend a person or event.[192] The verses emphasize the legal responsibilities of the king, writes McKane.[193] On the one hand, the standard structure of parallelism invites such repetition, but, again, the repetitions have a narrative, dialogic effect. Repetition here, as with the earlier varying and repeated effort to describe the lower class, again suggests inadequacy.

Several inferences may be drawn from these two verses. One is that this activity

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[189] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible," 294.
[190] Bakhtin, "Problems," 293.
[191] Newsom, "Bakhtin," 25.
[192] Sneed, 247.
[193] McKane, 410.

being advocated for is not presently happening, or there would be no need to call for it. Another is that while in one sense the text appears to be instructing Lemuel on his duties as king, in another sense, it betrays uncertainty as to how a king ought actually to rule. Through employing multiple variations of the same concept, Lemuel and his mother try again and again to get right their policy toward the poor. This concern for speaking extends through every layer of the text: manifold references to orality within a text that depicts a character advocating a king to speak, the king in question being one who does *not* speak in response to his mother's rebuke, within a text introduced as the "words of" a king, yet whose own words are jumbled with his mother's.

The imperfect, unfinalized attempt of Lemuel and his mother to accurately speak the condition of the poor or to develop an adequate treatment for them resembles Gayatri Spivak's observation of how the "sovereign subject"[194] of India has been represented in Western discourse. In Spivak's scenario, the dominant interpretation of third-world females is of "white men saving brown women from brown men."[195] This she condemns as a gross distortion and oversimplification. *Open your mouth for the speechless!* In Proverbs 31, also, exists the taint of portraying the "subaltern" in a way that constructs the elite as virtuous while failing to fully represent those who are ostensibly being advocated for. Where in Prov. 31.1-9 is the subaltern's own conception of their history and reality? "One never encounters the testimony of the women's voice-consciousness," Spivak observes.[196] But in Prov. 31.1-9, where rulers fail to represent, and the oppressed themselves fail to speak on their own behalf, the *text* approaches just such

[194] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271.
[195] Ibid., 305.
[196] Ibid., 297.

communication, exposing via its own repeated grasping that the poor and oppressed are *not* known and their remedy has *not* been supplied.

We reach, here, a new position from which to evaluate the attitude of Lemuel and his mother toward the oppressed of their land. Clearly the royal strategy is insufficient, with the potential for harm, but in its awareness of a problem and its effort to address said problem, it has redeeming possibilities as well. The exhortation to speak exists in proximity to a new reflection on society to come in vv. 10-31. These two poems contain several keywords and concepts in common. So is the second pericope a response to the mother's rebuke? Does it obediently manifest the call to speak and to judge on behalf of those who are oppressed? Does it expand upon her concerns? Such questions orient our explorations in chapters to come.

The Work of Mother's Counsel

The second half of Prov. 31.1-9 continues the work of earlier verses in expressing communal lack and desire, especially as related to communal resources and social organization. When communities feel themselves vulnerable to chaos and upheaval, they seek stability through establishing gender norms and other hierarchies. Likely this was the case for post-exilic Jews returning to Yehud, seeking to establish themselves in a "homeland" where they had never lived before.[197] Concerning gender construction, in vv. 5-9, still the son is positioned as actor, with the mother off center, urging him to act. This continues the male-centered construction of society and gender identities to which the text contributes. The effect is to limit what women can do, both within the world inside the text and the one outside it, taking cues from Lemuel and his mother. Note that the

[197] As depicted in Ezra-Nehemiah.

mother's use of legal terminology demonstrates knowledge and ability, yet males are the ones assumed to adjudicate disputes.

As far as social organization, the mother's call to "judge rightly" legitimates hierarchy, portraying it as beneficial to both rulers and ruled. Yet attention to polyphony and a dialogic understanding of truth allows the marginalized voices mentioned in the text to push back against the elite's rationale for rule. Clearly Lemuel and his mother are struggling to grasp societal needs and remedies. A better organization of society might exist if, instead of being spoken *for,* the "oppressed," "perishing," "bitter in soul," "speechless," and "needy" could speak for themselves. On the other hand, if, realistically, imperial rule is the only option for the colonized in the ancient world, then perhaps the scribe in wrapping up this mother-son quarrel is attempting to voice the desires and needs of many in the community for increased intervention on their behalf.[198]

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to uncover depths of meaning in Prov. 31.1-9 that derive from attention to narrative details and their possible function for the post-exilic Yehudite community. Such functions include expressing and processing communal desire and lack, needs and anxieties. Key to this approach is understanding the polyphony of texts: that words, phrases, chunks of lines, etc., can have multiple meanings in themselves and can generate new meanings when understood as existing in dialogue with each other and with texts and concepts outside the text. Prov. 31.1-9 exhibits polyphony in multiple ways, beginning with the double focalization of v. 1's words of Lemuel, his mother's rebuke. This setup allows viewing one incident through two perspectives, an activity that

[198] I am grateful to Danna Nolan Fewell for this insight.

mimics the real functioning of societies. Ambiguities and polyvalence within the text enable marginalized voices to push back against those aspects of the text which place male, elitist views front and center.

Also key to my socio-narratological approach is recognizing the emotion bursting through the mother's words. This mother — so suggest her words and the gaps between them — feels anger, anxiety, passion, and loss concerning her son. While often not attended to, emotions form a primary means of persuasion.[199] Here in Prov. 31.1-9, the emotions displayed by such an influential, binding figure as a mother intensify her words, convicting hearers that the issues she is raising concerning royal duty are of crucial importance. They cannot be neglected, they must be discussed. The unfinalizability in the text as the mother seeks and fails to properly depict class issues and resolutions invites discussion to continue beyond the page.

Interpretation, to be comprehensible to others, must be grounded in reason and support. But it is nonetheless subjective.[200] Readers choose meanings according to their own values, assumptions and experiences. My conclusions about Lemuel and his mother comprise reasonable inferences in light of textual content, context, and abiding aspects of family and communal dynamics. However, with Bal, it must be acknowledged that, "An interpretation is never anything more than a proposal."[201]

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[199] Karl Allen Kuhn, *The Heart of Biblical Narrative: Rediscovering Biblical Appeal to the Emotions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 6.

[200] "Most studies of narrative texts fail to account for their own subjectivity," writes Bal (13).

[201] Ibid., 11.

CHAPTER THREE

PROV. 31.10-22: OF WIFELY EXERTIONS

Eshet chayil, mi yimtzah? Proverbs 31's second poem also commences with a question: "A woman of *chayil*, who can find?" As earlier in v. 2, the question signals dialogism, because it implies an audience to whom the question is directed. In addition to the implied hearers within the text, readers past and present form this audience, interest piqued as minds imagine resolution. A question by its very nature forms an expression of lack and desire: something is missing; something is sought. The questions of Proverbs 31 thereby convey mini-narratives with which a community processes anxieties and needs, along with strategies for communal success, with varying perspectives and interests communicated in the words themselves, the gaps between them, and some key ambiguities. Interpreting this acrostic involves examining how this poem relates to its preceding neighbor. Is it a continuation of the mother-son quarrel? If so, in whose voice, mother or son? Does the double focalization sustain? Or does this poem form a clean break? If so, how are the questions and concepts raised in vv. 1-9 also treated here? Are they reinforced, expanded, contradicted, or something else?

Duane Garrett's analysis of the Proverbs 31 acrostic seems fitting: "The poem is both acrostic and chiastic in structure. Either one of these is sufficient evidence of the poet's skill; the integration of the two is astounding."[1] For this chapter, I focus only on

[1] Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14

vv. 10-22, saving the rest of the poem for chapters four and five. Verses 10-22 set the scene for features to come, acquainting us with characters and significant spaces and foreshadowing upcoming events through subtle expressions of lack. I draw attention to the poem's narrative elements, asking how these inform meaning and what work such a social narrative might be doing. I am asking what happens if we read this poem through a socio-narratological lens, understanding it as a dramatic expression meant to accomplish some identity-constructing work in the community. Rather than a verse-by-verse treatment, as in chapter two, I here instead treat larger units according to prevailing theme.

Connection to Preceding Pericope

Bruce Waltke asserts the superscription of v. 1 must apply to the entire chapter, because otherwise vv. 10-31 would be unique within Proverbs in not having a superscription ascribing authorship.[2] Such binds the two poems together. However, Prov. 31.10-31 is an acrostic, and as such its alphabetic structure signals strong boundaries; surely the poem begins with letter *aleph*. In addition, some ancient texts locate the poem not at the end of the book of Proverbs but earlier within the corpus. This variability of location also weakens any suspected original connection to the preceding passage of 31.1-9.[3] Many scholars treat the poems as independent writings.[4] But others argue that

(Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 248–49.

[2] Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 501-502.

[3] Alexander Rofe, "The Valiant Woman, gynē sunetē and the Redaction of the Book of Proverbs," in *Vergegenwartigun des Alten Testaments,* eds. Christoph Bultmann Walter Dietrich, and Christoph Levin. (Gottingen: Vandenhoect and Ruprecht, 2002), 144.

[4] e.g. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Tremper V. Longman, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006); Madipoane Masenya, *How Worthy is the Woman of Worth?: Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in African-South Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

enough commonality exists to treat them as a unit.[5] The two do have keywords in common — including *chayil* — as well as common themes, such as treatment of the poor. They both present their message through prominent use of a female character who possesses associations with wisdom. It may be helpful to view the two in manner similar to a musical composition exploring variations on a theme. Here, the approach in common is to invoke core human relationships to explore communal needs and desires. In v. 1-9, a quarrel between mother and son surfaces perspectives related to social order, wealth preservation and caring for the poor. Verses 10-31 utilize a different but also profound relationship, that of husband and wife, to surface these same issues from different angles, supplying differing strategies for coping.

If we do ascribe the superscription to the whole of chapter 31, then interesting implications result. One tradition understands Lemuel to reference King Solomon, with the acrostic thereby serving as Solomon's admiring praise of his mother, Bathsheba.[6] A more general understanding of the acrostic with Lemuel as its narrator could understand it as pushback against his mother's criticism of his duty-shirking, supplying a detailed description of upon whom the strength of the nation truly depends: not royal rule, but laboring women. On the other hand, if the acrostic is read as the continuing voice of Lemuel's mother, then the meditation on an *eshet chayil* could develop her earlier warning against dallying with women (3), with the acrostic encouraging a proper marriage to a proper prospect.[7] Reading the chapter in such vein, Jana K. Riess deems v.

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[5] Christine Yoder, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009),
289. See also Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, "Rethinking the 'Virtuous' Woman (Proverbs 31): A Mother in Need of Holiday," in *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), 101.

[6] Raymond Apple, "The two wise women of Proverbs chapter 31," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39.3 (2011): 178.

[7] Beatrice Lawrence, "Gender analysis: Gender and Method in Biblical Studies," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in honor of David L. Petersen* (Atlanta: Society

10 "poignant" because v. 1-9 established that women will consume a man's strength as Delilah drained Samson, and so the implication of the question, *eshet chayil, who can find?*, is that "women, who nine times out of ten cannot be trusted with much, will rarely be as faithful and industrious as our Woman of Worth."[8]

Although valuable meanings derive from reading vv. 10-31 through the narration of either Lemuel or his mother, a third option suggested by our examination of v. 1 in chapter two of this dissertation is an unnamed, unknown scribe, even the external narrator who records Lemuel's recollection of his mother's words and then launches into his own exaltation of the *eshet chayil*. According to Richard Horsley, virtually all writing and reading taking place in Second Temple Judea was done by scribes trained for royal or temple administration.[9] To the extent that they engaged with written literature, other members of society such as peasants, farmers, merchants, and rulers would receive the material contained in texts via the oral recitation of scribes.[10] Thus instead of (or in addition to) the previously mentioned voices of Lemuel and his mother, a scribe as narrator would be a ready voice echoing as speaker in a hearer's imagination, and especially so since Proverbs 31 promotes and resembles the wisdom instruction developed and passed on by scribes.[11] Entertaining this third option enables acknowledging the shift in genre between vv. 1-9 and 10-31 while also nodding to the placement of these two pericopes beside each other, prompting different meanings from

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of Biblical Literature, 2009), 341.

[8] Jana K. Riess, "The Woman of Worth: Impressions of Proverbs 31:10-31," *Dialogue* 30.1 (1997), 148.

[9] Richard Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second-Temple Judea* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 101.

[10] Ibid.

[11] For example, the term, "my son," (v. 3), which is employed in other instruction literature (Prov. 2,3,5).

those emerging when the texts are read independently.

Implications of Scribe as Narrator

Recognizing a scribe as narrator focuses attention on aspects of ancient Hebrew literature commonly overlooked by contemporary readers due to our immersion in literacy. According to F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, poetic texts of the Ancient Near East were intended not for private consumption through the silent reading of scrolls but for communal oral performance.[12] Writing supported orality, and vice versa.[13] In Proverbs 31, oral origin or intention for oral performance is suggested in the first several verses via the repeated references to speaking, which signals oral performance.[14] Verse 1 not only contains *divray*, *massa,* and *yasar*, all connoting orality, but also, vv. 8 and 9 twice extol: *pethach pechah* — "open your mouth." As for the acrostic, it is true, among poetic genres, scholars consider it to be more directly a product of writing rather than speaking, having evolved from abecedaries used by scribes to teach their students the letters of the alphabet.[15] Yet even ancient acrostics display accommodation to the needs of a listening public. They contain short lines, parallelism, alliteration, assonance and other features pleasing to the ear and helpful for memorization.[16] Such is true of Proverbs 31. For example, v. 11 contains a mellifluous repetition of sounds: *batach bah, lav ba'lah.*

Drawing upon comparisons with African oral poetry, Emmanuel O. Nwaoru understands the Proverbs 31 acrostic to be a recitation chanted, perhaps by a woman, in a public setting such as a festival or funeral.[17] Such reflections from a scholar familiar with

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[12] F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2015), 278-279.

[13] Robert D. Miller, "The Performance of Oral Tradition in Ancient Israel," in *Contextualizing Israel's Sacred Writings*, ed. Brian Schmidt (Atlanta, SBL Press, 2015), 180.

[14] Dobbs-Allsopp, 267.

[15] Ibid., 304.

[16] Ibid., 304-305.

[17] Emmanuel Nwaoru, "Image of the Woman of Substance in Proverbs 31:10-31 and African

orality can help other readers of Proverbs 31 conceive how public performance might affect its delivery. Many biblical poems supply direction concerning staging;[18] others we can only imagine. Considerations include: What are the options for tone(s) that a performer might use? Where might words be spoken more loudly for emphasis … or might pauses create a distinct effect? How might the body of the speaker move to illustrate the words? For example, in Proverbs 31, are the terms evoking a warrior accompanied by aggressive gestures?

Such issues of orality and performance contributing to meaning reinforce a text's communal nature. The presence of implied speaker and audience, their respective identities and responses to each other affect how the text is conveyed and received. This is true whether those experiencing the acrostic within the text are a scribe and his direct apprentices or a more general community audience gathered together, cooperating with the text's signals as to narrator and audience, projecting themselves within that world as its young males, learning not only how to read and write but also the ideology and practices of the scribal class.[19]

Horsley claims scribal instruction occurred through the method of oral call and response.[20] Perhaps instructor and students recited alternating lines of the Proverbs 31 acrostic, the alphabetic progression aiding recall of the poem while also reinforcing memorization of the alphabet itself. If Proverbs 31 is a scribal teaching tool, what other performative modulations might a scribe pursue to better capture the attentions of his audience? Of these, Robert Miller writes, "Audience-performer interaction would have

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Context," *Biblische Notizen 127* (Salzburg: Aleph-Omega-Verlag, 2005), 47.

[18] Dobbs-Alsopp, 261.

[19] Mark Sneed, *The Social World of the Sages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 180.

[20] Horsley, 83.

been of great importance in determining the form of the performed material."[21] It makes a difference what scene lies before those reciting and reflecting upon the *eshet chayil*. If instruction occurred in city gates,[22] or if the poem were performed to a wider audience gathered there,[23] then would a teacher-performer on occasion gesture to a community member passing by their school? Can an audience see servants working their spindles or looms? Do they hear a woman bartering with merchants for best price? The location aids in visualization, influencing which elements of the poem are understood by hearers as prominent.

Prov. 31.10-12: Introducing the *Eshet Chayil* and her Master

12. *Eshet chayil*, who can find? Her value is far beyond corals.
13. Her husband puts full confidence in her and never lacks for plunder.
14. She supplies for him good things, not bad, all the days of her life.

Verses 10-12 introduce the Proverbs 31 acrostic, setting out its subject and point of view. Narratively, these first few lines introduce the characters — a husband and wife — and hint of upcoming conflict in the expression of lack: "… who can find?" Waltke says of the rhetorical question in v. 10 that it "aims to awaken within the audience the desire to find such a wife or to be like her."[24] In this comment Waltke acknowledges and speculates concerning the work of a text for a reading community. We will examine such work in greater detail, focusing in vv. 10-12 on its focalization, the gender construction

[21] Miller, 189.

[22] According to Leo Perdue, "… schools would have been located in the home of the teacher, the gate or marketplace, or perhaps even in a separate building." *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 70. See also Mark Sneed, *The Social World of the Sages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 154.

[23] At least as imagined setting if not in reality. Ro claims that biblical Hebrew was not the common language. This would preclude common people experiencing Proverbs 31. Johannes Un-Sok Ro, "Socio-Economic Context of Post-Exilic Community and Literacy." *Zeitschrift fȍr die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 120.4 (2008), 604.

[24] Waltke, 520.

taking place and how these express and resist communal anxieties.

As explained earlier, focalization distinguishes itself from the speaking aspect of narration and instead concerns the vision by which what is narrated is narrated. The opening line asks who can find a wife — traditionally a male interest and concern, suggesting a male focalization. Such is confirmed in v. 11: "Her husband puts full confidence in her and never lacks for plunder." Focalizing via the husband affects the acrostic's presentation of the *eshet chayil* in several ways. The features highlighted about her in upcoming verses are those that benefit her husband. It is "she supplies him," not "he supplies her," though that may also be true (12). She does *him* only good, not evil, enhances *his* honor. This focalization depicts the *eshet chayil* in ways that undermine her own best interests. She does not rest (16,18), though in reality everyone must. She does not speak on her own behalf, which permits an assumption that she must have nothing to say, must be content with her life of ceaseless toil and service to others. Into this void the narrator speaks everything, apparently, that needs to be said, including that this woman "does not fear" (21). This assertion, unconfirmed by the woman herself, steers readers away from any concerns about the wife's wellbeing, her needs and desires.

Because the Hebrew word *ishah* can mean either "woman" or "wife," an instance of gendering to note is that in the world created by this text, a woman is a wife.[25] Robert Kawashima asserts that bachelors or spinsters in Ancient Israel "effectively constituted structural impossibilities."[26] People secured their position, status and legal rights through

[25] Cf. Wilda C. M. Gafney, "Who Can Find a Militant Feminist? A Marginal(ized) Reading of Proverbs 31:1-31," *The AME Zion Quarterly Review* 112.2 (2000): 25-31.

[26] Robert S. Kawashima, "Could a Woman Say 'No' in Biblical Israel? On the Genealogy of Legal Status in Biblical Law and Literature," *AJS Review*, Vol. 35.1 (2011), 6.

marriage and its ensuing attachment to a household.[27] The poem conditions men not only to be married but to place high value in finding the right kind of wife.

According to Samuel Adams, loss of land in Persian-era Yehud splintered kinship groups as people were forced to migrate to support themselves.[28] Perhaps in reaction to this, the Proverbs 31 acrostic depicts a stable household in which social classes and sexes know their roles and engage them with enthusiasm. Women tend to be associated with home and security, so it would not be surprising for a community anxious about loss of home to inscribe its lament upon a woman. However, the close association of women and home means that women's actions can impact the home, either for good or ill, leading to anxiety about women's choices and a desire to control them. What endeavors will women put their hands toward? Such concern is suggested in repeated mention of the *eshet chayil*'s hands.

Unfortunately, the type of woman actually desired in Proverbs 31, this "virtually omnicompetent wife,"[29] is difficult, if not impossible, to locate.[30] Such is indicated in two ways: 1) by employing a rhetorical question, "who can find," a phrase employed elsewhere in biblical texts to suggest that the answer is "not many" or "no one,"[31] and 2) through comparing this woman's "value" to rare stones.[32] By implication, any woman

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Samuel L. Adams*, Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 12.

[29] Norman Whybray, "Proverbs," in *The Good Life in the Old Testament, ed. Norman Whybray (London, New York: T&T Clark,* 2002), 162.

[30] According to Clifford, the implication is that finding one requires a miracle, 274.

[31] Bruce V. Waltke, "The Role of the 'Valiant Wife' in the Marketplace," *Crux* 35.3 (1999), 31. Also Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 891. A similar example would be Micah 7:18. Yoder cites Prov. 20.6 and Qoh 7.24. See also McCreesh, 36-37.

[32] Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2001), 77.

around, if she is easily seen, is likely *not* an *esheth chayil,* a scarce commodity. Nwaoru's commentary reveals the impact of this feature's gender construction. In describing the *eshet chayil* as a real woman, a successful career person and devoted household manager, not domineering, but meek and quiet, he writes, "… unfortunately, indeed, such women are rare to find."[33] From the very first verse, then, a woman is positioned as subject to evaluation by men, an evaluation which for most women will be negative. As Christine Yoder notes, "What is a tribute to the lives and work of real women is, at the same time, an objectification of the same."[34]

This husband wants wealth and the comfort and security that wealth brings. The wife thereby is valued for the value she brings her husband. Writes Ehud Ben Zvi: the poem promotes a correspondence between both "being and creating a treasure."[35] Economic terms applied to the *eshet chayil* support this. In vv. 10-12, they include the modifier *chayil*, which can mean wealth or property, *micrah,* meaning literally "purchase price," *penineem,* "coral" or "jewels." Such is true also of "plunder," "supplies," and "good things." Opinions differ as to what the "purchase price" refers to — perhaps a dowry the wife brings into the marriage, or payment the groom makes to a bride's family.[36] The purchase price might not even refer to the woman herself, but rather to the high prices she is able to demand for the quality of products she offers for sale. In any case, the choice to employ the particular metaphor of a monetary payment to describe the

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[33] Nwaoru, 62.

[34] Christine Roy Yoder, "The Woman of Substance (ʾšt-Ḥyl): A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122. 3 (2003), 446.

[35] Ehud Ben Zvi, "The 'Successful, Wise, Worthy Wife' of Proverbs 31:10-31 as a Source for Reconstructing Aspects of Thought and Economy in the Late Persian / Early Hellenistic Period," in *The Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context,* eds. Marvin Lloyd Miller, et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 29.

[36] See Fox, *Proverbs 10–31,* 891-892.

woman has the effect of commodifying her by associating her with it. It socializes readers into the notion that women are objects to be assessed as to value. Yoder writes, "To the extent that money measured the worth of a woman's dowry, it measured the financial 'worth' of the woman who brought it." [37]

Recognizing this initial conception of woman as commodity influences interpretation of plunder in v. 11. While conventionally taken to reference all the good things the *eshet chayil* brings to the household, the "woman as commodity" emphasis invites considering that the plunder referred to here is actually the woman herself.[38] A host of biblical texts do include women amidst the spoil to be taken by Israelite warriors.[39] Prov. 31.11 accommodates an understanding that this woman is *so* bountiful, so full of *chayil* that there is no exhausting her capacities as spoil to be enjoyed.

With "plunder," the poem projects the husband as a warrior, triggering a prominent gender construction for males in the ancient world.[40] Yet in its mention of the wife "supplying" (12), it images the *eshet chayil* as warrior, too; she is one bringing home the plunder. Wife as warrior is promoted all the more via a primary connotation of this wife's key modifier, *chayil*. Many times in biblical texts *chayil* translates as army or soldier.[41] Note, though, that in expressing, "*he* never lacks…" it is the husband, not the wife, enjoying the spoils of war. The wife thereby acts essentially as her husband's proxy soldier. Or she is perhaps one of his troops, like David's "mighty men," (2 Sam 23.8) or

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[37] Yoder, "The Woman of Substance," 443.

[38] Yoder understands plunder to refer to the wife's dowry, which her husband can raid for his own purposes. See Yoder, *Wisdom*, 5 or Yoder, "The Woman of Substance," 434.

[39] e.g. Deut. 20.14.

[40] David Clines, "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible," in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 217.

[41] e.g. Exod. 14.4,9,17,28.

Joshua's "mighty men of fighting strength" — *gibboray hachayil* (Josh. 8.3, 10.7), forces to be deployed strategically in battle for maximum gain.

Yet another martial allusion occurs in v. 11, with, "Her husband puts full confidence in her." The verb, commonly translated, "trust," is *batach*. It occurs over 100 times in the Bible and often involves seeking protection from threat via some more powerful person or object: Yahweh, military leaders, foreign powers, chariots, city walls, and so on. Deut. 28.52 mentions, "… high and fortified walls, in which you [*batach]* trusted," and 2 Kings many times depicts the Israelites "trusting in" the Lord or Egypt (18.5,19,20,21,22,24,30; 19.10). Here in v. 11 the husband focalizes his wife as an effective object for hiding behind. Ben Zvi explains the value of the husband's "trusting in" his wife as, "She is their fortress and army, upon whom they can reliably lean."[42] Such warrior allusions may rely for effect upon strains of warrior goddess worship within the popular culture.[43]

In considering the gender construction of this husband and wife as warriors, we must not neglect its potential for humor, especially in light of the oral performance of this piece. Humor can be missed when something meant to be performed is instead read. Given the additional sexual connotations of *chayil* having to do with virility, seed or sperm, is it not likely that the reference to a husband enjoying plunder of his wife includes his having sex with her? As a performance, it is easy to imagine, "he never lacks for plunder," delivered with a thrust of the hips and a wink.

In promoting a wife as a warrior, Proverbs 31 engages a practice Hilde

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[42] Ben Zvi, 37.

[43] See Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985); Bernard Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: a Hebrew Goddess Redefined (*US: Pilgrim Press, 1986).

Lindemann Nelson deems the "arrogant eye," which centralizes the viewer's standpoint and experience.[44] Within this framework, the best possible compliment that can be extended by a man to a woman is to liken her to a man.[45] A comparable example occurs in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, where Socrates compliments a landowner's skill in training his wife by saying, "… you show that your wife has a masculine intelligence."[46] The phrase, "a manly woman," is even how the Septuagint renders *eshet chayil* into Greek: γυνή ανδρεία. What results from characterizing a woman as a warrior is both gender reversal and gender fluidity. Gender reversal exists in that, though the husband is labeled with the dominant term of *ba'al*, meaning "master," "owner," or "lord," he is also vulnerable to attack, and his wife serves as the something stronger that protects. In light of the wife's command of her house, Claudia Camp labels *ba'al* "almost ironic."[47] Gender fluidity occurs in this woman embodying the traditionally masculine trait of violence.[48] Scholar Esther Fuchs comments, "When women act like men, the audience laughs, and the message is that men had better wake up to their patriarchal and national responsibilities."[49] These two upending genderings facilitate renegotiating the social roles of men and women.

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[44] Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001), 16.

[45] Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, "Taking It like a Man: Masculinity in 4 Maccabees"
Journal of Biblical Literature, 117, no. 2 (Summer, 1998), 269.

[46] As cited in Moore and Capel Anderson, 267.

[47] Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985), 91.

[48] Harold C. Washington writes, "Across the cultural spectrum male domination remains almost ubiquitous, and … violence is most often construed as a masculine attribute." "'Lest He Die In Battle And Another Man Take Her,' Violence and the Construction of Gender in Deuteronomy 20-22," in *Gender and law in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East,* eds. Victor Matthews, et al. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 193.

[49] Esther Fuchs, "Laughing with/at/as Women: How Should We Read Biblical Humor?" in *Are We Amused?: Humour About Women in the Biblical Worlds,* ed. Athalya Brenner (London; New York: T & T Clark International, 2003), 132.

Clearly, an *eshet chayil* pleases her husband, but the lack of reciprocal expectations for men pleasing or seeking to please women introduces a gendered power differential. Choosing *ba'al* (11), and not the more neutral word for husband, "*ish*," reinforces the husband's dominance. Madipoane Masenya writes that *ba'al* "denies a woman her full personhood, as she is viewed as someone who can be owned by her master, the man."[50] From this rhetorical choice we see that the power differential between husband and wife is not so natural as to need no defending. Its defense is another work of the poem.

Although the verb commencing this poem is "to find" (*matzah*), the extensive description that follows of the wife's qualities and benefits to the husband suggest that perhaps the text is not motivating its male audience toward merely looking for a wife or hoping one will appear. Rather, it is coaxing men to themselves train up the type of wife that will satisfy them and enhance the entire community, with Proverbs 31 serving as a type of training manual. In similar vein, the contemporaneous Greek text, *Oeconomicus*, portrays an Athenian husband instructing his younger wife in household management.[51] Ben Zvi's phrasing of the theme of Proverbs 31 reveals (perhaps unwittingly) such a purpose: "… the judicious management of a wife was likely to lead to increased social power."[52] His phrase can be taken two ways — as praising the wife's management of a household or as exhorting a husband's management of his wife.

In addition to gender construction, a work in and of itself, vv. 10-12 express and respond to the anxieties of an uncertain existence. Dianne Bergant notes that, given the

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[50] Masenya, 154.

[51] Bernhard Lang, "The Hebrew Wife and the Ottoman Wife: an Anthropological Essay on Proverbs 31:10-31," *Anthropology and Biblical Studies* (Leiden: Deo, 2004).

[52] Ben Zvi, 33.

male producers and consumers of this text, no better symbol for a "most desirable possession" exists than a woman.[53] In the worlds behind and within the text, men desire women: sexually and to provide children, and to create and maintain a home. Lacking these causes anxiety, as depicted in Adam's search among the animals for a suitable partner (Gen. 2.18-20). Some scholars have projected the men of the *golah* community to have outnumbered women by perhaps 30,000 to 10,000.[54] Thus, presenting the *eshet chayil* as hard to find could be expressing a literal need, making it all the more relevant as symbol. Because the implied answer to the rhetorical, "who can find?" is "no one," the question posed signals to the reader that what follows is a fantasy or, if you will, a day dream, a wish list of desirable qualities. Proverbs 31 thereby becomes a creative description of a utopian existence, what a man would like his woman and his life overall to resemble if he could have anything he wanted. As Ben Zvi writes of Prov. 31.10-31, "It was a utopian world, and such worlds often provided societies ways to address present lacks and express their longings."[55]

In v. 11, mention of "lack" betrays the communal awareness of need, vulnerability, even danger. Such awareness is displayed even more strongly in a first-century Aramaic Targum that translates this verse as: her husband "will not be plundered or lack."[56] Meeting need through "plunder," *shalal,* also has a communal nuance, because spoils of war only come through group effort at battle. The battleground background of *shalal* could in addition encompass a collective memory of times of national threat and a

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[53] Diane Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 98.

[54] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "The Lives of Women in Postexilic Era," in *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, eds. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Calduch-Benages (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 13.

[55] Ben Zvi, 40-41.

[56] See John F. Healey, *The Targum of Proverbs, Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

corresponding conviction of what is at stake in choices such as the selection of a wife, choices that may determine whether this community will be one to enjoy spoils or be the spoils for someone else.

In v. 12, focalization via the husband suggests that the ensuing depiction of the *eshet chayil* will be not only fantasy but even approach caricature. She brings him *only* good — and *no* bad — *all* the days of her life. In subsequent verses, she works "with pleasure" (13), rises early (15), stays up late (18). "This woman is unbelievable and unbalanced," writes Cheryl Kirk-Duggan.[57] No obstacles inhibit the *eshet chayil*; in whatever she sets out to accomplish, she succeeds. Although she does have children (29), activities of childbearing and rearing that would realistically take up a tremendous amount of her time and energy are not mentioned.[58] Perhaps most unrealistically, the *eshet chayil* has nothing to say. These details fit Carole Fontaine's characterization of biblical texts as, "… overdrawn caricatures by men whose obsession with their own honor and wisdom made them less than accurate observers of Woman and women, Wisdom and wisdom."[59] According to Masenya, such idyllic descriptions could have served to cultivate the quality of family life necessary for "accomplish[ing] tasks of survival in rebuilding society,"[60] tasks such as establishing claims to land and positions of political power.[61]

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[57] Kirk-Duggan, 107.
[58] Eskenazi, 29.
[59] Carole R. Fontaine, "The Proof of the Pudding: Proverbs and Gender in the Performance Arena," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29, no. 2 (Dec 2004), 197.
[60] Masenya, 95.
[61] Ibid., 96.

Prov. 31.13-18: Listing of Her Attributes

13. She pursues wool and flax
and applies her hands with pleasure.
14. She is like trading ships;
From far away she brings her food.
15. And she rises while it is still night
and provides prey to her house
and assigned tasks [/portions] to her girls.
16. She makes plans about a field and grabs it;
From the fruit of her hand she plants a vineyard.
17. She binds with strength her loins
and she braces her arms.
18. She knows that her trading is good,
and her lamp does not go out at night.

Following the introductory verses of 10-12, Proverbs 31 describes just what is so beneficial in obtaining an *eshet chayil*. Although Yoder sees no apparent order[62] to the following verses, Waltke's breakdown seems reasonable, categorizing vv. 13-18 as related to her "cottage industry" and vv. 20-27 as to her social accomplishments.[63] Mention of economic themes conveyed through warrior allusions continues here, especially in v. 17, with the girding of loins and strengthening arms. Also, more subtly, in hunting for "prey" (15) and the verbs *zemam* ("to scheme") and *leqach* ("to seize"), used to describe the obtaining of land (16). Through such descriptions the text promotes, for Yoder, the business dimensions of marriage,[64] or, in Ben Zvi's view, "ideal economic behavior at the level of a single household."[65]

Repeatedly, words of praise and celebration confirm the *eshet chayil*'s affluence. She is not one of the population's vast majority of peasants barely surviving at

[62] Yoder, *Proverbs*, 289-290.
[63] Waltke, 515.
[64] Yoder, Wisdom, 78.
[65] Ben Zvi, 30-31.

subsistence level. Bringing food from afar (14) indicates that her household produces more than needed to immediately consume and she can thus trade for choicer goods. The *eshet chayil* has multiple servants (15) in a culture where to have even one would be a mark of privilege.[66] Reference to her lamp not going out at night (18) signals prosperity in having oil to burn rather than conserving and waiting for daylight.[67] She and her household are abundantly clothed (21-22.) The dyed linen she wears conveys not only affluence but royalty.[68]

Verses 13-22 identify three primary contributors to the *eshet chayil*'s income generation: textile production, trade, and farming. Control of these three permits the *eshet chayil* to maximize profits by managing the entire supply chain of her finished goods. Owning land enables her to grow flax and cultivate sheep for wool (13), from which she produces clothing and other linens (19-21), with which she trades with foreign merchants (18, 24), the profits from which she reinvests to diversify her crops (16). The all-inclusive nature of her industry matches the inclusivity symbolized via the *aleph-taw* sequence of the acrostic style.

Waltke insists that "the capable wife" is "exclusively a homemaker."[69] It is difficult to transfer that modern category of "homemaker" onto the ancient culture, where homes were the spaces of labor. Ben Zvi observes, "… the individual household was and was considered by the community to be the basic social and economic unit."[70] Even so, the *eshet chayil* is associated with several spaces outside the home: fields, foreign lands,

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[66] Yoder, *Proverbs*, 293.

[67] Yoder, 295. Also Richard Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 275.

[68] Leo Perdue, *Proverbs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 278.

[69] Waltke, 519.

[70] Ben Zvi, 31.

and, later in the poem, city gates (31). Based on ancient Near Eastern sources, Yoder has amassed an extensive list of occupations in which Persian-era women participated: stockyard workers, treasury workers, goldsmiths, keepers of fruit, irrigation workers, winemakers, tax handlers, extenders of loans, renters and managers of fields.[71] Yoder argues based on the network of roads throughout the Persian empire that Yehudites would have interacted with and been impacted by other areas of the empire; thus Yehudite women likely also participated in diverse occupations.[72] Proverbs 31 even testifies to such interaction in its mention of *Kena'any,* "Canaanites," which refers to Phoenician maritime traders (24),[73] and flax (13) and dyed linen (22), which come from Egypt.[74] More appropriate than Waltke, therefore, is Yoder's assessment that the *eshet chayil* comprises "… a composite figure of real — albeit exceptional — women in the Persian period."[75] Whereas Fontaine opines that the elevated depictions of women in Proverbs may be "inversely proportional to the truth of real women's lives,"[76] it could be that one work of the text is actually to aid the community in recognizing and assessing the impact of women's control of economic resources in the Persian era. At this time, women could inherit and dispose of property.[77] They conducted business transactions.[78] Within the Jewish community at Elephantine, women could initiate divorce proceedings.[79] If such were also true in contemporary Yehud, perhaps some conceived a communal threat to

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[71] Yoder, *Wisdom*, 60.
[72] Ibid., 48.
[73] Yoder, "The Woman of Substance," 441.
[74] Ibid., 442.
[75] Yoder, *Wisdom*, 90.
[76] Carole R. Fontaine, "The Social Roles of Women in the World of Wisdom," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature,* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 25.
[77] Adams, 27.
[78] Carol Meyers, "Strong Woman (Prov 31:10-31)", n.p. [cited 2 Nov 2017]. Online: https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/passages/main-articles/strong-woman-prov-31.
[79] Adams, 27.

cultural identity and possession of land if women married outside their tribe.[80] Thus it makes sense that anxieties related to women would produce a text that concentrates on how — not just to *find* a woman of property, prosperity, and vigor (10) — but to channel her activity toward others' gain. Texts such as Prov. 31.3 control women or distance them, but the acrostic promotes the social, political, and economic advantages to men of such powers. Such purpose would explain the text's silence concerning work undertaken by the husband.

Of course, when speaking of empowered, resourceful women, we are speaking of the elite class, those whom the text decidedly focalizes in celebrating the comforts she enjoys. The very phrase, "*eshet chayil,"* has been speculated to be a title signifying class, similar to the English designation of "lady," a counterpart to *ish gibbor* (Ruth 2.1) — "gentleman" or "lord."[81] For non-elites, focalization obscures their experience. Consider v. 16. Most English translations render it, "She considers a field and buys it." But who is the *eshet chayil* obtaining this land from? What circumstances necessitate its sale? The sellers are unknown and unrecognized. When someone gains land, someone else loses it, and for this ancient community, gaining or losing land was a life-threatening issue and a major concern. Yet the speaker in Proverbs 31 doesn't sympathize with the ones losing their land. He or she portrays it as a good thing, because it enhances the wealth and security of the people promoted: the *eshet chayil* and her husband.

The verse's second half also betrays elite focalization. "From the fruit of her

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[80] Harold Washington, "The Strange Woman of Proverbs 1-9 and Post-Exilic Judean Society" in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature,* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 159.

[81] Katherine B. Low, "Implications Surrounding Girding the Loins in Light of Gender, Body, and Power," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 1 (2011), 26.

hands she plants a vineyard." In reality, a vineyard is planted with the hands, rough and dirty, of a common laborer. Based on use of the phrase "the fruit of her hands" in v. 31 and the associations of hands with textile making, the line likely references the profits of this woman's industry,[82] used for such things as to purchase seed, tools, and pay laborers. Here in v. 16 the metaphor of "the fruit of her hands" conflates these two, imaging the woman and her wealth as the peasant laborers planting the vineyard. Many commentators cooperate with this suggestion, taking it literally that the *eshet chayil* herself is completing this arduous labor,[83] concluding with Riess, for example, "She was probably a prosperous farmer's wife."[84] Such interpretations erase from the scene the actual workers of the land, promoting her activity over theirs.

Proverbs 31 mentions the wife's hands seven times. Readers need to give careful attention to the mention of body parts in this poem, including also arms, loins, and tongue. Whereas the husband's body is never mentioned, Proverbs 31 makes readers aware that the *eshet chayil* has a body and exerts it vigorously. One effect of this is to reinforce focalization, that it is *he*, the husband, looking at *her*. The poem differs from typical ancient Near Eastern texts praising females in not emphasizing physical beauty or sexuality.[85] In fact, it downplays these in verses to come. According to Michaela Geiger, the hand is the most prominent body part mentioned in Deuteronomy, where it signifies power, control or force.[86] If this is the case also in Proverbs 31, the seven-time mention ascribes to her tremendous power, control, and force.

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[82] Yoder, *Proverbs*, 294.
[83] e.g. Yoder, *Proverbs*, 294-5. Low, 28.
[84] Riess, 149.
[85] Longman, 541.
[86] Michaela Geiger, "Creating Space through Imagination and Action: Space and the Body in Deuteronomy 6:4-9," in *Constructions of Space IV: Further Developments in Examining Ancient Israel's Social Space,* ed. Mark K. George (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013), 54.

Girding of the loins in its literal sense means to tie up one's garment so as to allow vigorous movement, for example, in warfare or in farming.[87] Proverbs 31 is too invested in promoting the wealth and leisure of the elite to intend to depict the *eshet chayil* as literally having "sweaty thighs" (so Katherine Low).[88] Metaphorical intentions are signified already in the assertion that her loins are bound "with strength," rather than a belt. The warrior allusions throughout the poem do not mean the *eshet chayil* is literally a warrior but simply enhance the praise of her economic activities. So, too, the "laboring peasant" references heighten these by likening her energy and strength to that required, for example, of a reaper of the fields. As Waltke interprets, this "wealthy woman" has "the capacity to do the required, sustained manual labor … though undoubtedly she employed male slaves to do much of the work."[89]

Low says loin girding in biblical texts "… reveals a complexity of bodily social relations and power dynamics…" between those who command and those who carry out those commands.[90] Such is the case here in Proverbs 31. Borrowing from the experiences of the lower class to praise one from the upper class is another example of elite focalization in its assumption that it is okay to use them for one's own enhancement rather than credit them their actual contributions. It is a form of exploitation, a "plundering" of laborers. Yet depicting the *eshet chayil* as a common laborer does also transfer the qualities being praised in her onto that class. It blurs the boundaries of where the *eshet chayil* belongs or can be found. Another complexity exists in the girding of loins engaging not only class but also gender. As laborer, this wife works for her husband, and

[87] Low, 4.
[88] Ibid., 30.
[89] Waltke, 525.
[90] Ibid., 4.

such depiction subjugates her. Yet the repeated, diverse depictions of her strength reinforce the warning of v. 3: that women are a threat.

When considering the work of vv. 13-22, we have already mentioned its processing the position and power of women in Persian Era Yehud, a processing that includes both celebrating the benefits to men that these can accrue and subtly positioning women as subject to men, their masters. We also noted the text promoting the perspective and values of the community's elite. These constitute examples of "othering," in which a community reinforces its identity through power-asserting distinctions according to gender, ethnicity, class, religion and so on.[91]

Spaces contribute to othering. As space theorist Doreen Massey observes, certain social groups possess more power than others to move and to direct mobility within a given space.[92] What spaces are occupied by whom and how reveals hierarchies of power commensurate with the ideologies and identities that othering constructs. Tim Cresswell points out that expressions of "know your place," or "put him in his place" imply that spaces are not just physical locations; they are mental conceptions bound up with "a sense of the proper,"[93] including who belongs where and who should behave how in any given place. Such is illustrated in v. 15, where the *eshet chayil* rises, provides for her household, and directs her servant girls. The *eshet chayil*'s actions toward others in a given space display and reinforce her power over others.

Verses 10-22 mention several spaces: bringing food *from afar*, giving prey to her

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[91] Robert Maldonado, "Reading Others as the Subject(s) of Biblical Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative,* ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 434.

[92] Doreen Massey, "Power Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, eds. Jon Bird, et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 62.

[93] Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3.

house, planning to acquire a *field* and planting a *vineyard*. Bernard Lang explores whether the *eshet chayil* conforms to the practice in some ancient Mediterranean cultures of women staying at home while men go out in public, commensurate with the separate spheres of their responsibilities and roles.[94] Lang acknowledges the ambiguity of phrasings such as "she plants a vineyard," and her wide-ranging activities.[95] Yet, he argues, comparison with the Persian-era wife in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* affirms the basic pattern in Proverbs 31 of the woman active in the house and the man outside.[96] Alternately, other scholars conclude the *eshet chayil* must move freely in public spaces.[97]

We may reasonably doubt whether the *eshet chayil* could accomplish all that is attributed to her while remaining inside at home. But it is curious that this utopian vision does not explicitly locate her in public spaces anywhere near to the degree that her husband is situated, explicitly placed upon the elders' bench (23). Readers locate the *eshet chayil* through inference or assumption amid ambiguities that produce uncertainties. "From afar she brings her food," could mean she travels to foreign lands, or it could mean that she stays put and purchases locally goods imported from afar. The woman makes plans concerning a field, but the text does not actually say, like a Boaz-type from the book of Ruth, that she visits her fields for inspection. These cases render nebulous the location of the worthy woman. Even the twice-repeated mention of "her house" — *betah* — does not actually locate the *eshet chayil*, because it seems in this context to refer to the

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[94] Bernard Lang, "The Hebrew Wife and the Ottoman Wife: An Anthropological Essay on Proverbs 31:10-31," *Anthropology and biblical studies* Leiden: Deo, 2004: 140-157. Also, Bernard Lang, "Women's Work, Household and Property in Two Mediterranean Societies: a Comparative Essay on Proverbs xxxi 10-31." *Vetus Testamentum* 54, no. 2 (2004): 188-207.

[95] Lang, "Hebrew Wife," 147.

[96] Ibid.

[97] e.g. Longman, 543; L. Juliana Claassens, "The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31:10–31 and Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 1 (2016), 11; Masenya, 103;

people of her household, not the physical space itself. The *eshet chayil*'s lack of positioning in the spaces of labor associated with her in comparison to her husband's location in spaces of leisure puts her off balance. Why is the *eshet chayil* not placed? Is her location merely so obvious as to not need mentioning? Or is something else going on? Does her location not matter, since what does matter is her revenue? Perhaps her lack of positioning allows a sense that she is everywhere, her omnipresence representing the impact of her labor being everywhere felt.

Recognizing this feature of the text prompts a new response to the poem's opening question: "A worthy woman, who can find?" It may not be after all that she is as rare as the rhetorical question would imply. Perhaps the community actively engaged in perceiving and conceiving its women via this poem has not yet settled where to locate her in a position where she can be found. The lack present in the poem reveals a lack in the community.

Trading routes, home, fields and vineyards, these are places of labor, and the stark gender roles enacted in these spaces encourage associating the wife with labor. Yet as a poem developed by men for men, this celebration of economic activity is likely not merely a "leave everything to the women" ethic. Many perceive a problem with such an interpretation and so fill in a textual gap with presumed male activity. The husband also works, Michael Fox assures, otherwise he would not be worthy of an *eshet chayil*.[98] The text "lopsidedly" depicts only the female as breadwinner, writes Waltke, neglecting males, but surely in reality "the husband has founded the home on a sound economic foundation" that enables his wife to "settle down and function to her maximum

[98] Fox, *Proverbs 10–31,* 893.

capacity."[99] Joel Biwul detects markers of male contribution in the text, overlooked amidst excessive praise for the wife.[100] He writes, "The salient roles [the husband] performs both at the familial and societal levels embedded in this poem (Prov. 31.11, 23, 28b-29) singles him out as a celebrity and role model *par excellence* who should elicit an equal amount of public praise, and perhaps, even higher praise than the female figure."[101]

While readerly insertions of husbandly activity are one way of resolving this dilemma, another is to revisit the assumption that the *eshet chayil* functions as role model for women only. Norman Whybray points out that the virtues displayed by the *eshet chayil* are promoted also in other proverbs.[102] For example, Prov. 10.4: "Whoever works with slack hands becomes poor, but the hand of the diligent brings riches."[103] Ben Zvi sees the *eshet chayil* as a role model representing not only the ideal wife but the ideal Yehudite household, whose economic activity forms the foundation of society. He writes, "Since the *eshet chayil* was remembered as an ideal human wife, she could embody and communicate what the community — or better, what the well-off sector of the community — considered ideal economic behavior at the level of a single household."[104]

A female figure as role model for men works in ways that a male role model cannot. Women in relation to males are the "other," marginalized and subjugated, so they can effectively personify the *golah* community, whose leaders saw themselves as the marginalized other of the Persian Empire.[105] In addition, according to some scholars, the

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[99] Waltke, 520-521.
[100] Joel Biwul, "What is He Doing at the Gate," *OTE* 29/1 (2016), 35.
[101] Ibid., 47.
[102] Whybray, 162.
[103] See also 12.24, 13.9, etc.
[104] Ben Zvi, 30-31.
[105] Eskenazi, 29, referencing Orit Avnery, "The Threefold Cord: Interrelations Between the Books of Samuel, Ruth and Esther" [Hebrew] (Ph.d. diss., Bar ilan University, 2011), 105.

elite sector of society looked down on trade, with several ancient texts referencing it disparagingly.[106] Depicting the wife and not the husband engaging in trade could be useful in sparing the male audience's concern for honor, playing up the benefit to the community while deflecting attention from actual male participation.

Utopian elements also encourage the community's participation in economic development. The text celebrates the *eshet chayil*'s easy access to land: "She makes plans about a field and grabs it" (16). It mentions no competing claims based on inheritance or genealogy,[107] no burdens of taxation or famine. In this utopia, any fighting taking place is metaphorical, not literal. Yoder reads the claim in v. 14 that the *eshet chayil* brings food "from afar" as suggesting "her capacity to navigate successfully in the imperial economy."[108]

There is some difference of opinion among scholars as to how robust was the economy of Persian-era Yehud. The discovery of weights and measures shows some level of participation in trade.[109] "Palestine" was not isolated, writes Yoder, and in fact experienced "unprecedented growth in international commerce" commensurate to a cosmopolitan marketplace.[110] Yet according to Marvin Lloyd Miller, the Persian Empire did not target the provinces of Yehud and Samaria for development or trade.[111] Rather, it tapped the agricultural region primarily to extract taxes.[112] Even so, he notes, communities located along major trade routes could specialize in crafts and

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[106] Especially as compared to scribal activity. Ben Zvi, 34.
[107] Ben Zvi, 35.
[108] Yoder, "The Woman of Substance," 443.
[109] Adams, 101.
[110] Yoder, "The Woman of Substance," 441.
[111] Marvin L. Miller, "Cultivating Curiosity: Methods and Models for Understanding Ancient Economies," in *The Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context,* eds. Marvin Lloyd Miller, et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 14.
[112] Ibid.

nonagricultural goods as to enhance their income.[113] According to Sarah Pomeroy, textiles in antiquity functioned as "liquid wealth" which could be "readily converted to cash."[114] The industry produced not only clothing and bedding such as mentioned in Proverbs 31, but also rugs, curtains, containers, tents, wall hangings and more.[115] Such items vastly expanded, beyond what could be attained through farming, a household's wealth and standard of living.[116]

Uncertainty concerning social context multiplies options for understanding the depiction of the *eshet chayil* engaged in commerce. It may, as Yoder believes, express a real practice of Yehudite women. But it could also convey communal desire for such practice, encouraging increased urbanization in light of a fear over the region weakening if it does not develop economically. Again, intertwining the language of warfare with commerce holds significance. The field, the marketplace, the weaver's loom: warrior-occupied, these become battlefronts. Jews have no longer their own army or king to lead them, but they can fight now in other ways.[117] In Proverbs 31, given the plethora of economic terms and praise for the *eshet chayil*'s ability to turn a profit, the primary way to fight for survival is through economic development. Marriages resulting in increased claims to land (16) would also be decisive wins. Surely the *eshet chayil*'s masculinity — she is strong, active, violent, and clever[118] — would ease a male audience in seeing

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[113] Ibid.

[114] Susan Pomeroy in Xenophon, *Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary, with a Mew Translation by Sarah B. Pomeroy* (Oxford, 1994), 62 and 63-6. Cited in Lang, "Women's Work," 193.

[115] Jennie R. Ebeling, *Women's Lives in Biblical Times (*New York: T & T Clark International, 2010), 56.

[116] Adams, 41.

[117] Ben Zvi, 36.

[118] Several terms applaud cleverness: securing spoil (11) and prey (15), scheming to grab a field (16), navigating like a merchant ship (So asserts Waltke, 524) (14), and the spindle and whorl (19), which could be a case of double polysemy whose Hebrew words also mean cleverness and skill (Gary A. Rendsburg, "Bilingual Wordplay in the Bible," *Vetus testamentum* 38.3 (1988), 272).

themselves as exerting strenuous action in the spaces they occupy. So we can read Proverbs 31, vv. 13-18 in particular, as an economic call to arms.

Prov. 31.19-22: Handling the Poor

19. She thrusts her hands toward the spindle;
Her palms grasp the spindle-whorl.
20. Her palms she stretches toward the poor;
Her hands she thrusts toward the needy.
21. She does not fear snow for her household,
because all of them are clothed in double layers.
22. She makes bed coverings for herself;
Linen and purple are her clothes.

As mentioned above, vv. 10-12 introduce communal need and desire through depicting a utopian existence in which a husband gains from his wife everything he needs. In vv. 13-22 we have noted utopian features also in the *eshet chayil*'s economic success. Here in vv. 19-22, utopian elements indicate further anxiety over resources. A protagonist who does *not* fear (in this case, snow) (21) reveals said fear as conceivable for someone. Compared with other parts of the empire, Yehud was a poor province,[119] its occupation no more than 30 percent its former size.[120] For most households, activities centered on simple survival,[121] for example, the time-consuming task of preparing food.[122] According to Ben Zvi, even the elite among the community were relatively poor[123] and could have conceived themselves as vulnerable to a poor harvest,[124] burdensome taxes,[125] or political instability interrupting transportation of goods. The poem praises the *eshet chayil* because she protects her husband and family from

[119] Ben Zvi, 38.
[120] Eskenazi, 13.
[121] Adams, 100.
[122] Ibid., 43.
[123] Ben Zvi, 38.
[124] Ben Zvi, 41. See also Adams, 45.
[125] Adams, 2, 7.

starvation, cold, nakedness, homelessness, landlessness. All these things she obtains for her family are likely deprivations that the community either has suffered or fears suffering. Whereas in Persian-era practice, beds were uncommon and most slept on straw,[126] this utopia depicts the *eshet chayil* making luxurious bed coverings for herself (22). The three-time mention of "house" (*bayit*) represents a settled, secure life, as opposed to one of wandering. [127]Observes Whybray, "The security depicted is the security from the fear of poverty."[128]

But even in utopia there are limits to who flourishes, contrast with the "have nots" being necessary for highlighting the flourishing of those "haves" who are focalized. Verse 20 mentions the oppressed (or "poor") (*aney*) and the needy (*avyon*). These are the same Hebrew words employed in v. 9, where Lemuel was twice advised, "Open your mouth." Here, instead of "mouth," the narrator highlights "hands" as the operative body part for the *eshet chayil* when engaging the poor. Mention of *yad* and *caf* each occur twice (19-20), their placement forming a chiasm. The chiastic structure binds the two concepts of textile production and the poor. Repetition of parallelism conveys significance and emphasis. Waltke summarizes vv. 19-20 as, "Hands that grasp to produce open wide to provide."[129] Representative of the views of most interpreters, he writes, "pride of place is given to her ministry to the afflicted and destitute in the community."[130]

For lines of praise, it is curious that a particular idiom within them conveys

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[126] Gerhard Lensky, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 271.

[127] Whybray, 161.

[128] Ibid., 163.

[129] Waltke, 527.

[130] Ibid., 529.

tension, even violence: *yadeha shelacha*. This occurs twice, in the outer frame of the chiasm, lines 19a and 20b. Translators commonly render this phrase as something along the lines of "she holds out her hands"[131] or "her hands she stretches."[132] But elsewhere in biblical texts this idiom always has an aggressive connotation.[133] It occurs, for example in the Song of Deborah to describe Jael's act of driving a tent peg through Sisera's skull: *Her hand she put to the tent peg, her right hand she shot out [yadeha shelacha] to the driving hammer* (Judg. 5.26). Vocabulary and rhythm of Prov. 31.20 and Judg. 5.26 are markedly alike. Both lines are set within poems about women classified as "warrior hymns." Even the spindle and spindle-whorl may themselves symbolize fighting because Anat, the warrior goddess of Ugarit, used these as a weapon.[134] It is easy to understand why textile production would be depicted using warrior imagery, as we have already noted above the text's function as an economic call to arms. But in Proverbs 31 the powerful woman is not only engaging her *work* in an aggressive manner (19a), but also the needy (20b). Why? And what is the underlying connection signaled by the chiasm's binding of the woman, the oppressed/poor/needy, violent action and economic productivity?

Adding to the ambiguity of *yadeha shelacha* is the equally uncertain meaning of line 20a, an inner portion of the chiasm: "Her palms she stretches toward the oppressed." What does this mean? Some use the similarity of v. 20a with Deut. 15.7-11 to guide interpretation here.[135] These verses urge the Israelites to "open" (*pethach*) their hands

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[131] Longman: "she sends," 536; Waltke, 529.
[132] Fox, *Proverbs 10–31,* 889; Yoder, *Proverbs*, 295; Clifford, 272.
[133] Albert Wolters, "Proverbs 31:10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form-Critical Analysis," *Vetus Testamentum* 38, no. 4 (1988), 453.
[134] Longman, 545.
[135] Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance,* 88, n. 72.

(*yad*) to the poor (*aney*) and needy (*avyon*) among them, including lending generously. Based on this comparison Yoder imagines the *eshet chayil* lending to the poor, even at a profit.[136] But Fox disagrees, arguing such practice would violate common decency and the ethics stipulated in various law codes.[137] Rather, "[s]he gives charitable aid to the poor."[138]

Although Proverbs 31.20 and Deut. 15.7-9 do share two words in common — "hands" and "needy" — we should note against aligning them that Prov. 31.20 employs different verbs than either the "open" or "lend" that occur in Deuteronomy 15. The verb of 20.a, "stretch" (*perash),* occurs once in a context having to do with charity, but then without the noun, "hands": "The children beg for food, but no one *perash* [extends] anything to them" (Lam. 4.4). Elsewhere in biblical texts, the combination of verb-object, stretching out hands, signifies not charity but a gesture of appeal, usually to Yahweh, but at other times to the temple or to other gods.[139] It is likely an appeal for mercy. In Isa. 65.2, Yahweh is the one stretching out hands, to Israel, begging them to turn from their rebellion. So in Prov. 31.20a, when the *eshet chayil* stretches out hands to the poor — could she be appealing to them? But for what?

An interesting use of the phrase, "stretching out hands," occurs in Lam. 1.10: "Enemies have stretched out their hands over all her precious things." This use of the phrase does not pertain to providing or protecting; quite the opposite. This use calls to mind the earlier images in Proverbs 31 of warrior capturing plunder, and hunter, the prey.

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[136] Ibid., 89.
[137] Fox, 895.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Exod. 9.29,33; 1 Kgs. 8.22,38,54; 2 Chron. 6.12,13,29; Ezra 9.5; Job 11.13; Pss. 44.20,143.6; Isa. 25.11; Jer. 4.31; Lam. 1.17

In fact, the second-most common use of the verb *perash* accompanies the noun, "net," as in, stretching out a net to capture prey.[140] These observations concerning use elsewhere of "stretching out hands" suggest a relationship between the elite *eshet chayil* and the oppressed and needy that does not have to do with giving charity or otherwise blessing the poor. The stretching and the thrusting need not imply giving at all, but, more likely, taking. What we have, then, in v. 20 is two parallel lines both mentioning hands, themselves a symbol of power, and both employing images of opposition between the *eshet chayil* and the poor, with the *eshet chayil* the aggressor. "Stretching out hands" signifies something like trapping, or poaching, with the *eshet chayil* the predator of the poor. Is it possible that the chiasm of vv. 19-20 develops the warrior and hunter images of v. 12 and v. 15 to clarify that in her economic activity, the *aney* and *avyon* are the *eshet chayil*'s plunder and prey?

But how could this be? Before dismissing such a notion as unworthy of the *eshet chayil,* hero of Israel, let us recall another portion of this poem that concerns the *eshet chayil*'s interactions with the needy: her obtaining of land. We have already noted how focalization obscures those from whom the *eshet chayil* takes land, but they are present nonetheless in the simple fact that we know in the world of the text and behind the text that land is neither undiscovered nor unclaimed, so it must be taken from someone.

Also, as we shall see, the language itself makes their presence known. *She makes plans about a field and grabs it* (16). Regarding the first verb, *zemam*, scholars generally opt for the most neutral, positive connotation when translating this word in this context, rendering it as "consider," "survey," "ponder," and so on. However, it should be noted

[140] Isa. 19.8; Lam. 1.13; Ezek. 12.13, 17.20, 19.8, 32.3; Hosea 5.1; 7.12.

that, without exception, this word when used elsewhere (13 times) in the Hebrew Bible always involves sinister intent. It pertains to evil people scheming evil deeds, such as the builders of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11.6) and false witnesses (Deut. 19.19). Or it refers to Yahweh intending some violent destruction as punishment for a people's sin.[141] Surely these uses elsewhere warrant recognizing some negative intention being similarly conveyed in Prov. 31.16. Perhaps "devise," or "scheme," or "plot," would succeed in conveying this sense in translation.[142]

Likewise the second verb in v. 16, *leqach*. English translations usually render this here as "buys."[143] "Buys" understandably builds upon the many economic terms present throughout the poem. However, *leqach*, which occurs frequently in biblical texts, does not connote elsewhere the fair and free economic exchange such as modern readers understand via "to buy." Where land is purchased, as in Gen. 23.13, the verb *nathan* is used, as in "to give silver." *Leqach* means "to take, grab, seize," and other variants.[144] It is used to describe taking any number of objects, including women as wives (whether through warfare or otherwise). We have, then, in line 16a, two verbs that are *not* pacific; they depict the *eshet chayil* acting forcefully — fully consistent with her labeling as possessing *chayil* and the earlier mentions of plunder[145] and prey.[146] She strategizes and seizes. We could say of v. 16 that she homes in on a vulnerable target and wrests away

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[141] Jer. 4.28, 51.12; Lam. 2.17; Zech. 1.6, 8.14. An exception is Zech. 8.15.

[142] Lawrence, 342.

[143] According to Waltke, in Aramaic, Arabic and postbiblical Hebrew, "taking" and "giving" mean "buying" and "selling" (511).

[144] Koehler, et al., 534.

[145] Clifford notes that *salal*, meaning "plunder, booty," seems "an odd word choice to describe income," 274.

[146] "… the Hebrew word *teref* … can be understood to mean 'robbed or plundered goods.' " Juliana Claassens, "The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31:10–31 and Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 1 (2016), 11.

from them their land.

In this the *eshet chayil* embodies the real situation in Persian-era Yehud between the elite and the peasant classes with respect to land. The Persian government favored the *golah* and extended special terms for them to acquire land in exchange for their assistance with establishing order and extracting tribute in the region.[147] Marriage played a role in shifting land ownership, as some returning elite gained access to land through marrying land-owning families.[148]

Land was the primary means of production, foundation of wealth. A majority of the population engaged in agricultural pursuits,[149] yet settlement of the *golah* into the territory destabilized access to land.[150] For peasants, burdensome tax measures and land seizures became commonplace.[151] Adams writes, "Foreign rulers and local elite became proficient in usurping land for themselves, such that long-standing agrarian households often lost the territory and stability that went with one location over many generations."[152] According to Jack Pastor, adjustments in land possession forced those already occupying the land into tenant-farmer situations.[153] The crops of wine and grapes preferred by the Empire for exportation strained peasants' ability to feed their families as they labored to produce this royal tribute.[154] Perhaps Proverbs 31's mention that the *eshet chayil* plants a *vineyard* is blatantly locating her as participating in this system of

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[147] Herbert Marbury, "The Strange Woman in Persian Yehud: A Reading of Proverbs 7," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period, ed. Jon Berquist* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008), 173.
[148] Low, 29.
[149] Adams, 82.
[150] Ibid., 46.
[151] Ibid., 89.
[152] Ibid., 13.
[153] Jack Pastor, *Land and Economy in Ancient Palestine* (London: Routledge, 1997), 14.
[154] Sneed, 49.

extraction and exploitation.

Considering together, then, v. 16 and v. 20, we see with regard to the non-elite similar language conveying attitudes and behavior on the part of the *eshet chayil:* using force to achieve material gain from others who have less power. Roland Boer's understanding of biblical texts in light of post-exilic economic conditions can further elucidate. In his view, the "palatine estates" producing luxury goods desired by imperial elites siphoned workers from village communes to perform the labor needed for production. Tensions arose between these two entities as the loss of labor impoverished the already poor rural areas.[155]

Boer understands many biblical texts to reflect upon and respond to this key tension. He writes, "Neither windows onto reality, nor expressions of the ideologies of the various groups that purportedly produced them, texts have indirect and contradictory connections with the socio-economic context to which they respond."[156] Concerning the book of Proverbs, Boer notes its multiple contrasts of wise and foolish, industrious and lazy, rich and poor; all channel toward a class consciousness in which being rich evidences wisdom, righteousness, and the blessing of God.[157] Conversely, the poor in Proverbs are so because they are "wicked, simple, lazy, rotten."[158] Boer writes, "It requires little imagination to see here the ethics and class consciousness of landlords and of the perpetual dinner guests at the monarch's table. Of course, the despised are precisely those who work the estates or the village communities."[159]

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[155] Roland Boer, "The Economic Politics of Biblical Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative,* ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 530.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid., 536.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid.

These noted tensions in text and context can help readers of Proverbs 31 push past traditions and assumptions that direct away from noticing the above-mentioned aggression concerning the poor and toward moralistic, virtuous interpretations of v. 19 and v. 20. Verse 20 portrays the oppressed and needy as being on the receiving end of the *eshet chayil's* actions. But we don't know whether she is offering or taking or if her reaching out is even experienced positively by those deprived. The non-elites do not speak for themselves. Perhaps they do not celebrate the *eshet chayil* to the degree of her focalized husband.

We mentioned above that *peresh* can mean "appeal." Is the text conveying the *eshet chayil*'s reliance upon the underclass to work her looms and fields? She needs them, thus reaches out to them. And *yadeha shelacha*, is this forceful sending of her hands an image meaning that with her superior strength, connections, and resources she is able to push or pull the peasant class into line, ensnaring them to work on her estate? These claims would be consistent with the attitude of the elite toward the poor in other passages of Proverbs and with the real conditions of life in Persian-era Yehud. It also answers the question posed above of what the chiasm is signaling in binding the *eshet chayil*, textile production, forcefulness, and the poor. The intention underlying this connection is that she works them just as skillfully as she works her garment-making tools. The *aney* and *avyon* are that resource with which she provides for herself and family. They *are* the plunder and prey.

Conclusion

This chapter has uncovered depths of meaning in Prov. 31.10-22 that derive from attention to narrative details and their possible function for the post-exilic Yehudite

community. Verses 10-22 comprise roughly the first half of an acrostic, and they introduce characters, significant spaces, and hints of dramatic conflict and tension. Concerning characterization, the text presents the *eshet chayil* and her husband within a power differential that promotes the husband over his wife, even as the wife is shown to be active, assertive, and powerful in her own right. Unlike some ancient Near Eastern texts and cultures, she is not confined to the home, but acts in other spaces as well. The wife's accomplishments in fields and marketplaces promote economic activity and can be understood as conditioning not only female activity, but also that of males. One significant feature of her economic productivity involves her interaction with non-elites, workers but not owners of land, those who are oppressed. Concerning these, via what it leaves unsaid, the text is at least ambiguous. At most, via an extended "predator-prey" allusion, it acknowledges a power differential between her and the non-elite that benefits her to their harm.

The notion of the *eshet chayil* treating others callously rather than charitably may jar some readers accustomed to more virtue-inclined interpretations. But it does cohere with elite attitudes represented elsewhere in Proverbs in which "ethical oppositions" promote an ideology that the poor deserve their fate and the rich deserve theirs.[160] It also aligns with our earlier discussion of Prov. 31.5-9, wherein contradictory voices struggle to articulate the experience and remedy for the *aney* and *avyon* due to the self-interested assertions of the ruling class.

As Roland Boer has noted, biblical texts "often attempt ideological and narrative resolutions to socio-economic contradictions."[161] For the post-exilic community,

[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid.

Proverbs 31's *eshet chayil* navigates competing interests between controllers of wealth and the extractors of it. Of these, Johannes Ro writes, "… the post-exilic society in Palestine created a new upperclass whose ideal was subservient devotion to the foreign superpower without any consideration for whether their own brothers and sisters were exploited in the colonial economic system."[162] The Proverbs 31 acrostic, however, suggests that consideration of these effects actually did take place among the *golah*. As reflected in their description of the *eshet chayil*, the elite were aware of and conflicted about their treatment of and posture toward the *aney* and *avyon.* Partial erasure of the peasant class bespeaks avoidance, reluctance to face uncomfortable realities, while the riddle of the chiastic relationship between the poor, textile production, and the *eshet chayil* suggests the complicated social engagements required for economic survival in a fragile colony. However conflicted the upper class might be, they nonetheless maneuvered their bodies in spaces in relation to other bodies to gain their wealth and security. The *eshet chayil* embodies this effort. She is their necessary fighter — powerful, strategic, and best of all, she wins. Collateral damage aside, she remains the hero of Israel.

[162] Ro, 605.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROV. 31.23-30: HUSBANDLY ASSERTIONS

Finally our husband gets his moment, positioned at the elder's bench of the city gates. Praise for his wife expands to focus on her successful engagements with family and community members. The poem can be read as an encomium, as most do, but it also contains narrative elements that contribute to meaning. In vv. 23-30, emphasis on honor sets up a contest between husband and wife. This chapter explores how this dynamic forms via setting, characterization, plot, and dramatic tension. It also attends to the function of such narrative arc within the Yehudite community — what values it promotes, whose interests advance and whose suffer as a result of these themes. Assertions concerning *chen* ("favor") and *yiroth Yahweh* ("fear of Yahweh") reveal ongoing gender identity construction that surfaces communal anxieties and proposes strategies for survival in Yehud.

Setting the Scene

Bruce Waltke recognizes the Proverbs 31 acrostic as a chiasm, with v. 23 its center.[1] Elements at this center elevate in importance due to their location there. This includes the city gates, named again in v. 31, the poem's final verse, also a significant positioning that adds emphasis. Contemporary readers, with images of gates conjured from our own picket or chain-link fences, may not fully appreciate the city gates of the

[1] Bruce Waltke, "The Role of the 'Valiant Wife' in the Marketplace," *Crux* 35, no. 3 (1999), 29.

ancient world. Their wooden doors alone could rise as tall as six meters, with a stone or mud brick structure of the gate above, and watchtowers at the corners one or more meters higher still.[2] "Gates" refers not only to the architectural structure allowing passage through the city wall barrier, but also to a sizable open square just inside the structure itself. Stelae positioned in the public square extolling the accomplishments of a local king, perhaps, could measure five meters tall.[3]

Verse 23 mentions gates, *sha'arim*, within the context of human activities taking place there and thereby constructs the space in reference to these human activities. According to v. 23, these city gates are a gathering place, a knowing and being known place, a sitting with elders place. "Space is a complex social phenomenon," writes Mark George, "not only physical but also constructed by the conceptual systems used to organize it, and the symbolic and mythological meanings societies develop in order to live in space."[4] According to space theorist Henri Lefebvre, physical, mental, and social aspects (or, as alternatively described: perceived, conceived, and lived spaces)[5] all occur simultaneously in any location.[6] Identifying them enables understanding the meaning of spaces for a given community. In v. 23, mention of "gates" reveals a *physical* space as *perceived* to be inhabited by humans. Being "known" there, and "sitting with the elders" reveals a *mental* space *conceived* as a place of honor and influence for the town's male elders. But does it also reflect the space as it is actually used, with attendant communal

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[2] Daniel A. Frese, "The civic forum in ancient Israel : the form, function, and symbolism of city gates," Dissertation retrieved from http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8tp5j3ch, 2012, 123.

[3] Ibid, 220.

[4] Mark George, "Space and History: Siting Critical Space for Biblical Studies," in *Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography, and Narrative*. New York: T&T Clark, 2007, 29.

[5] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 38-39. Using the terms translated into English: "spatial practice," "representations of space," and "representational spaces."

[6] Ibid., 12.

beliefs and expectations, therefore a *lived, social* space? Asking and answering such questions will clarify the identity construction and ideology projected in the text.

Characterizing the Husband

> 23. Known at the gates is her husband,
> in his sitting with the elders of the city.

Verse 23 locates the husband in the city gates. Though he has been characterized as an "inconsequential"[7] or awkward addition to the *eshet chayil'*s accomplishments, recognizing v. 23 as center of a chiasm elevates him in prominence. Duane Garrett writes that v. 23 establishes the central message of the poem — that a man of honor needs an *eshet chayil.*[8] She and all she produces are required for living that ideal of honor and authority that is depicted in v. 23.

Lacking a proper name, the husband is nonetheless individuated through description of what he does and where. He is known in the gates, and he sits there with the elders of the city. According to Lefebvre, space is social and involves "assigning more or less appropriate place to the social relations of reproduction, namely, the biophysiological relations between the sexes, the ages" and other demographic groupings.[9] Verse 23 is doing just such work as it promotes males ("elders") as community leaders occupying the city gates. Readers infer the husband, as a male occupying the gates, to be one who belongs there, in public, representing public presence and participating in it.

Myriad activities take place within the square formed between the city gates'

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[7] Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 247.

[8] Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC 14 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 249.

[9] Henri Lefebvre, "Space, Social Product and Use Value," in *State, Space, World: selected essays*, eds. Neil Brenner, and Stuart Elden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 186.

towers and walls: trade, cultic worship, tax collecting, inspections by soldiers, instructing youth, gathering to discuss problems or just to pass the time.[10] In light of such activities and as evoked by the figure of personified wisdom in Prov. 1.21 and 8.3, the gates form a space of argument and vigorous discourse. Legal adjudication is the activity most frequently mentioned in both biblical and Akkadian texts as occurring in city gates.[11] Within city gates town elders decided legal issues brought before them by other members of the community.[12] So in Genesis, Hivite elders decide at their city gates to make peace with Jacob's family through submitting to circumcision (Genesis 34). In Ruth, the elders approve Boaz' request to redeem Elimelech's land and marry Mahlon's widow (Ruth 4). According to Waltke, "sitting with the elders" in v. 23 forms a metonymy for judging. So the husband depicted as "sitting with the elders" (23) causes readers to presume the husband is himself a city leader and judge.[13]

As in earlier verses (11), the husband in vv. 23-30 exudes satisfaction with his wife's activities (29) while not himself engaging any labor. Is v. 23 another rendition of earlier verses depicting the *eshet chayil* bringing her master plunder? Beatrice Lawrence calls him a "bystander."[14] Some conclude the text's silence as to the husband's activities

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[10] See Natalie N. May, "Gates and their Functions in Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel," *The Fabric of Cities: Aspects of Urbanism, Urban Topography and Society in Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome,* eds. Natalie N. May and Ulrike Steinert (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), 77-121; Carey Walsh, "Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City Gates in Biblical Memory," *Memory and the City*, eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 43-60; Daniel A. Frese, "The civic forum in ancient Israel : the form, function, and symbolism of city gates." Dissertation retrieved from http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8tp5j3ch, 2012.

[11] Natalie N. May, "Gates and their Functions in Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel," *The Fabric of Cities: Aspects of Urbanism, Urban Topography and Society in Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome,* eds. Natalie N. May and Ulrike Steinert (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), 95.

[12] Carey Walsh, "Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City Gates in Biblical Memory," *Memory and the City*, eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 51.

[13] For example, Alexander Rofe, "The Valiant Woman, gynē sunetē and the Redaction of the Book of Proverbs," in *Vergegenwartigun des Alten Testaments,* eds. Christoph Bultmann Walter Dietrich, and Christoph Levin (Gottingen: Vandenhoect and Ruprecht, 2002), 147.

[14] Beatrice Lawrence, "Gender analysis: gender and method in biblical studies," in *Method*

makes him out to be a slacker, or not important to the functioning of society.[15] Other readers fill this gap with the assumption that the husband must also be extremely busy and productive, but that the text does not dwell on this so as not to detract from praise of the *eshet chayil*.[16] Considering the text's emphasis on wealth creation, the lack of toil may intend to elevate him as a man of leisure. Leisure signifies the luxury afforded by wealth, thus reinforcing the prosperity of this household and yet another way an *eshet chayil* benefits a man. The contemporaneous text of *Ben Sirach* reveals only men of leisure as considered qualified to study scripture and exercise authority based upon it.[17] So scholars' insisting the husband must be hard-working himself in unmentioned yet imagined ways[18] risks ruining the effect of dignity that depicting the husband sitting, only sitting, actually achieves. According to this view, the husband can be understood as extracting his wife's labor for his own consumption, an echo of v. 11's expression of the husband enjoying her as spoil.

However, a different meaning emerges when contrasting the husband's sitting with the wife's frenetic activity. Perhaps sitting conveys stability that results from possessing the power to establish and reinforce communal laws. Such would be a tremendous asset when facing possible disputes over property, trade, marriage, and so on. The husband's sitting as a judge is his own contribution to the family's economic

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Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in honor of David L. Petersen (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009),343.

[15] Such as Thomas McCreesh, who argues that "the husband is left with little or nothing to do!" Thomas P. McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31," *Revue biblique* 92, no. 1 (1985), 27. See Also Norman Whybray, "Proverbs," in *The Good Life in the Old Testament*, ed. Norman Whybray (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 162.

[16] Madipoane Masenya, *How Worthy is the Woman of Worth?: Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in African-South Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 105.

[17] Johannes Un-Sok Ro, "Socio-Economic Context of Post-Exilic Community and Literacy." *Zeitschrift fȍr die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 120.4 (2008), 603.

[18] For example, Joel Biwul, "What is He Doing at the Gate," *OTE* 29/1 (2016): 33-60.

prosperity. To the extent that her husband represents law and order, her own activities under his roof could gain similar endorsement. According to this understanding, the mention of husband in v. 23 is listing yet another resource, like her flax (13) and her "girls" (15), that the wife draws upon to fuel her industry.

The city gates scene described in Prov. 31.23 neatly summarizes the "public court of reputation,"[19] in which deeds performed in public are assessed by the public. The descriptives of "being known" and "sitting with the elders" honor the husband. Biblical scholar Bruce Malina has set forth a much referenced understanding of honor in Mediterranean societies, defining it as a person's self-perception of esteem according to the intersecting factors of authority, gender status and respect combined with the esteem attributed to that person by his or her social group.[20] Two main forms of honor are "ascribed" and "acquired."[21] "Ascribed" is that which one possesses at birth as a result of personal circumstances such as gender or family. "Acquired" can be gained or lost based on conformity to established social codes and participation in agonistic challenges, including public verbal performances of challenge and riposte.[22] Job's dialogues with his friends and Boaz's outmaneuvering of his kinsman at the city gates (Ruth 4) constitute biblical examples of honor acquired in the public court of reputation through verbal debate. Verse 23 celebrates the husband's ascribed honor, due to being male, and likely acquired honor, assuming that his community regards positively his interactions with others while sitting at the elders' bench. Mention of the prime location of city gates,

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[19] Zeba Crook, "Honor, shame, and social status revisited," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009), 593.

[20] Ibid., 592-3.

[21] Ibid., 593.

[22] Ibid. See also Victor H. Matthews, "Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Legal Situations in the Hebrew Bible," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East,* ed. Victor Matthews, et al.: 97-112. Sheffield, Eng: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.

which is the communal gathering spot, reinforces the value of honor being emphasized, not only because honor must be recognized in public, but also because so many activities that garner honor occur there, among them, trade and legal adjudication. Verses 10-22 dwelt heavily on the wife's participation in trade; v. 23 associates the husband with legal adjudication.

Characterizing the *Eshet Chayil*

> 24. Fine linen wraps she makes and sells;
> Woven belts she delivers to *Kena'any*.

In keeping with prior verses, vv. 23-30 reiterate the *eshet chayil*'s skill in textile production (24-25) and trade, particularly with non-Yehudites, the *Kena'any* (24), likely those living on the sea shore who were particularly adept at trading.[23] Again it singles out for mention her body, this time the tongue (26). Although we do not hear from her directly, the "teaching of *chesed* … on her tongue" suggests participation in public discourse on par with her husband, but untethered to the specific location of the gates.

Some new qualities also emerge. As could be expected of a married woman, the *eshet chayil* is a mother, a fact conveyed without elaboration. Whereas earlier in the poem fancy clothing advertises her high station (22), physical appearance now is downplayed, as "strength and honor" (25) replace linen and purple (22), and beauty is deemed a vapor (30).

As mentioned, the *eshet chayil* is not located publicly in the city gates, not to the explicit degree of her husband. Thus she cannot accrue honor as her husband does through mere association with the space of honor that is the city gates. Nonetheless, the

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[23] Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), 405.

poem does portray the wife as possessing honor. She continues to be likened to the admired figure of warrior through allusions to standing guard as at a watch tower (27), a second use of the word, *chayil* (29), and the phrase "to ascend above" (29) which in other contexts always has to do with engaging battle against an enemy.[24] In addition, the text describes the *eshet chayil* as wearing "strength and honor" (*oz vehadar*), and it lists multiple honor-accruing qualities, such as continuing commercial success[25] (24) and wisdom (26).[26] Verse 28 — "Her sons arise and bless her" — resembles Job's recollection of former days when he was highly honored: "The young men saw me and withdrew, and the aged rose and stood" (Job 29.8). Three times the verb, "to praise," *halal,* is directed toward her, and a similar verb, *ashar* (28), means, "A word of congratulations that honors a person."[27] In cumulative effect, then, one could argue the *eshet chayil*'s honor even outweighs her husband's.

Woman as Divinity

> 25. Strength and honor are her garments,
> and she laughs about the days to come.
> 26. She opens her mouth with wisdom,
> and the teaching of *chesed* is on her tongue.

The images used to honor the *eshet chayil* deserve further analysis. Language employed throughout vv. 23-30 shifts the dominant metaphor attributed to her from that of a warrior to a deity, even Yahweh himself. "Strength and honor [*oz vehadar*] are her

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[24] Albert Wolters, "Proverbs 31:10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form-Critical Analysis," *Vetus Testamentum* 38, no. 4 (1988), 453.

[25] Ehud Ben Zvi, "The 'Successful, Wise, Worthy Wife' of Proverbs 31:10-31 as a Source for Reconstructing Aspects of Thought and Economy in the Late Persian / Early Hellenistic Period," in *The Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context,* eds. Marvin Lloyd Miller, et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 31.

[26] Compare to Prov. 3.35: "The wise will inherit honor…"

[27] John E. Hartley, *Proverbs: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2016), 73.

garments…" (25). The book of Psalms commonly ascribes such qualities to Yahweh, for example, Ps. 96.6, 104.1, and 111.3 attribute to him "majesty and honor" (*ha'od vehadar*). Ps. 93.1, like Proverbs 31, attributes such superlatives to Yahweh through the metaphor of clothing: "Yahweh is king, he is robed in majesty; Yahweh is robed, he girds himself with strength." The keywords *torah*, *hokmah* and *chesed,* all attributed in Proverbs 31 to *eshet chayil* (26), elsewhere figure significantly in descriptions of Yahweh. Even the husband's and sons' act of praising the *eshet chayil* resemble obeisance to a deity, particularly given the substance of what they say, that she is better, or higher, than anyone else (29). Writes Albert Wolters, "God's incomparability, which is so frequent in Israel's hymns, … finds its human counterpart in Prov. 31.29."[28]

Woman as Watchtower

> 27. Watching over the actions of her house,
> for laziness does not eat bread.

A second image worth unpacking occurs in v. 27, which begins, "Watching over the actions of her household…" Elsewhere in biblical texts Yahweh is described as "watching over." For example: *In every place are the eyes of Yahweh, watching over the evil and the good* (Prov. 15.3). Assigning this verb to the *eshet chayil* contributes to her construction as protective deity. The initial verb, *zephah*, references the actions of a watchman scanning for danger at a lookout post,[29] commonly the corner towers of a city gate, as reflected in 2 Sam. 18.24-27: "And David sat between the two gates: and the watchman went up to the roof over the gate unto the wall, and lifted up his eyes, and looked …" So Tremper Longman renders v. 27a, "She is a lookout post for the doings of

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[28] Wolters, 451.

[29] Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1044.

her household…"[30] Occurring as it does after v. 23's mention of city gates, this allusion to one feature and function of city gates has the effect of equating the *eshet chayil* herself with those city gates. This is all the more so true in light of the allusion to city walls in v. 11, discussed earlier, which images the husband as protecting himself through hiding in or behind his wife as a soldier might *batach* — "trust in" — Yahweh, military leaders, foreign powers, city walls, and so on. So too, here in v. 27, the wife is set up as a crucial element of fortification.

Yet an interesting feature of this metaphor's presentation is the direction or focus of the watchman's gaze. She is not looking outward, across the countryside for an approaching enemy, but rather she looks within her own household for potential enemies. Such focus is reinforced via the second half of v. 27, which identifies what danger the *eshet chayil* is watching for: "… laziness does not eat bread." The Hebrew is usually translated here as some version of "… she [the *eshet chayil*] does not eat the bread of laziness." My rendering, following Waltke, understands the second person feminine singular pronoun of *lo tochal* ("she does not eat") to reference as subject, not the *eshet chayil*, but "laziness."[31] Laziness is also a feminine noun and thus an appropriate antecedent for the verbal conjugation.

Laziness endangers a household for the reason stated: it won't produce bread, in fact, prevents production of bread, and all the provisions needed for a household to survive and thrive. It makes sense that a text so consistent in celebrating economic activity would also discourage laziness. In post-exilic context, survival depended on full

[30] Tremper V. Longman, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 547.
[31] This reading goes against the Masoretic markings. Waltke, 32.

cooperation from all members of a household, so laziness must receive censure.[32] Verse 27 injects a new undercurrent of tension in the text, as it implies that not all household members always pull their weight, and it sets up the *eshet chayil* as adversary to these other members in that she is one who targets them. Here it is the *eshet chayil* who fits Doreen Massey's depiction of those in a given space who have the power to move and to direct mobility of others.[33]

Not in the Gates

Earlier we explored how the location of the husband in the city gates and the actions ascribed to him there impact his characterization. Locations also contribute to characterization of the *eshet chayil*. First we must note her *lack* of positioning within the city gates, even though her activities strongly indicate she passes through that sphere: she does engage commerce with traders (24), and even her weaving of fabrics could signal occupation of city gates, as excavations of city gates have uncovered in upper rooms remnants of looms and other textile production tools.[34] Refusing to situate the *eshet chayil* within the city gates denies to her the privileges of its associations, not only honor, as mentioned above, but also social connection and authority.

The *eshet chayil* interacts with many types of people: her family, her servants, the poor, and foreign traders. But any social network such as enjoyed by her husband in his sitting with the elders of the town (23) is not extended to her. The *eshet chayil* appears isolated from her peers. In ancient Mediterranean societies the labors of food preparation

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[32] Carol Meyers, "To Her Mother's House: Considering a Counterpart to the Israelite *bet ab,*" in *The Bible and Politics of Exegesis*: *Essays in Honor of Norman, K. Gottwald on His Sixty-\fifth Birthday,* eds. David Jobling, et al. (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), 42.

[33] Doreen Massey, "Power Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, eds. Jon Bird, et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 62.

[34] Frese, 276-277.

and textile production typically would be accomplished via groups of women working together.[35] According to Carolyn Osiek, gatherings in public areas such as the city gates formed one source of a woman's indirect power through developing social allies and allowing information to be exchanged.[36] Is this lack of connection with other women a sign of the *eshet chayil*'s elite status, meaning she is so elite she has no peers? Or is it an outgrowth of the poem's focalization via the husband? In such case, conversations and even commiserations may in fact be crucial to an *eshet chayil*, but if the husband is not a part of them or does not directly benefit from them, they do not warrant mention in Proverbs 31; they are not real.

As for authority, anthropologist Susan Rogers's distinction between authority and power may be helpful in understanding characterization of the *eshet chayil*. According to Rogers, authority is that ability to influence which is officially recognized and invested in institutions.[37] In Proverbs 31, the elders' judicial function in the city gates constitutes such authority. It is what the husband possesses. While power can accompany authority, it can also be exercised in indirect and unrecognized ways. The *eshet chayil*'s ability to turn a profit imbues her with power, as she can choose where to invest her profits (16) — or where to withhold them.

We see other signifiers of the *eshet chayil*'s influence in her oversight of her household (27) and in her "open[ing] her mouth with wisdom" and "the teaching [or law] of *chesed*" (26). The phrase "opens her mouth" recalls Lemuel's mother's call for such in

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[35] Anne Katrine Gudme, "Inside-Outside: Domestic Living Space in Biblical Memory" in *Memory and the City in Ancient Israel,* eds. Diana Vikander Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 69.

[36] Carolyn Osiek, "Women, Honor, and Context in Mediterranean Antiquity," *Hervormde teologiese studies* 64, no. 1 (2008), 330.

[37] Ibid., 327.

vv. 8-9. So what Lemuel's mother wants her son to do, the *eshet chayil* does. "With wisdom" can mean either a characterization of the quality of her words, or it can describe those persons among whom she speaks. The latter would constitute an indirect acknowledgment of the *eshet chayil*'s participation in communal discussions, again, commensurate to the husband's sitting with the elders. The phrase, *torat chesed*, is unique to biblical texts and amenable to multiple translations. *Torah* can mean "law" or "teaching."[38] If we take it to mean law, it suggests that in all her actions, she is guided by standards of *chesed*. If the sense lies closer to teaching, then *torat chesed* could mean either teaching *about* the topic of *chesed*, or it could mean teaching done in a *chesed*-like manner. The former implies that the *eshet chayil* is concerned to reinforce the principle of *chesed* among those she instructs, and the latter, that when she teaches, whatever she teaches, she does so through her own enacting of *chesed*.

But what is *chesed?* Scholars concede its difficulty to render into English. English Bibles often settle on "kindness," perhaps for simplicity's sake, or in deference to the subject's female gender. But kindness conveys an individualistic and moralistic twinge. It lacks the sense of communal commitment inherent to contexts deploying the word, such as the book of Ruth.[39] One prominent lexicon offers "joint obligation between relatives, friends, host and guest, master and servant; closeness, solidarity, loyalty."[40] Leo Perdue writes, "… in this context, a term that probably refers to the bond of solidarity that holds the household together and enables it to transcend individual greed and well-being for the

[38] Koehler, et al., 1711.

[39] One commentary on Ruth defines *chesed* as "kindness or generosity — that goes beyond the expected obligation." Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary – Ruth* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xv.

[40] Koehler, et al., 336-337.

collective good of the entire social unit."[41] In Perdue's definition, "collective good" holds paramount importance. Whether the *eshet chayil* practices *chesed* herself or teaches it to others, the text portrays her as one who acts and speaks for the betterment of her community. In this way also she is portrayed as one possessing power and influence if not authority.

The Home

Such reflections direct us toward a location closely associated with the *eshet chayil*: the home. Verse 27 mentions "her house" (*beytah*), fourth mention of this phrase in this poem.[42] Some scholars equate "her house" with a similar phrase that occurs in biblical texts, *bet 'em* ("house of the mother.")[43] *Bet 'em* appears less commonly than *bet 'ab* ("house of the father") and seems to correlate with narratives in which the mother figure is central and heroic, for example, the book of Ruth (1.8). Based on connotations of power inherent in this presumed connection between *bet 'em* and *betah*, Claudia Camp considers the *eshet chayil* to fulfill the responsibilities of a *bet 'ab*, "the leader/chieftain of the (ancestral) house."[44] According to this understanding of Proverbs 31, the home is the space where the *eshet chayil* possesses both power and authority.

As with the city gates, so also the space of "house" possesses associations that construct identities for those located within it. According to Lefebvre, the memory of "house" has an "obsessive," "nostalgic" quality, occurring in art, poetry, drama, and philosophy.[45] He explains, "The dwelling passes everywhere for a special, still sacred,

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[41] Leo Perdue, *Proverbs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 279.

[42] Also occurring in v. 15 and 21 (twice).

[43] Jennie R. Ebeling, *Women's Lives in Biblical Times (*New York: T & T Clark International, 2010), 28.

[44] Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985), 91.

[45] Lefebvre, "Production," 120-121.

quasi-religious and in fact almost absolute space."[46] In the Hebrew Bible, the house usually functions as a place of refuge and safety, though it can also present more ambiguously.[47] We have suggested the *eshet chayil* scrutinizes her own household for undermining laziness, but always her actions are directed toward providing for and protecting this same household. Since the home also symbolizes provision and protection,[48] women through the depiction of the *eshet chayil* in Proverbs 31 do become conflated with the home.

It is important to note, though, that polyphony of language allows understanding "her house" to signal just as much the house to which the woman belongs as that the house belongs in some way to the woman. Whereas the latter understanding empowers, the former confines. Many interpret "her house" in Proverbs 31 as identifying the *eshet chayil*'s proper sphere, contrasting with the city gates, which, as noted, belongs to men.[49] Most women in the Hebrew Bible are depicted in relation to domestic, private spaces,[50] and some ancient Mediterranean cultures promoted a male-public/female-private dyad.[51] We have already observed, however, that although she is not explicitly located either inside or outside the home, the *eshet chayil*'s activities require her to occupy many communal spaces. If we consider these verses according to Lefebvre's triad, the poem expresses both a *conception* of space in marking the "house" as "*her* house" and a *perception* of space in its implications concerning how the *eshet chayil* actually moves. An ideology shaping the text here surfaces in the choice to not locate her as explicitly as

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[46] Ibid., 121.
[47] Gudme, 63.
[48] Ibid., 78.
[49] e.g. Lang, Lawrence, Masenya, Waltke.
[50] Gudme, 69.
[51] Bernhard Lang, "The Hebrew wife and the Ottoman Wife: An Anthropological Essay on Proverbs 31:10-31," in *Anthropology and biblical studies* (Leiden: Deo, 2004), 146.

the husband and to (nebulously) associate her with one specific location even though she occupies many.

In terms of spatial conceptions, it is tempting to consider that Proverbs 31 projects a balance of power assigned to the sexes within their corresponding spaces: city gates for the husband and home for the wife. So in fact argue Camp and Osiek concerning the social arrangement of Mediterranean societies. But closely engaging vv. 23-30 reveals even in the space of home an advantage falling to males. As in vv. 10-22, here, too, the *eshet chayil* is silent. Though a narrator *describes* her as laughing (25) and speaking wisdom and *chesed*, these are expressions imposed upon her; we don't know her true thoughts or feelings.

The power of voice is only actually exercised by the narrator and the husband. Their subtle rhetoric within the home subjects the *eshet chayil* to their identity construction, reflecting conditions of the ancient world in that a woman was always under the authority of some man: her father, brothers, husband, or sons.[52] Here, these male figures classify her among the *banot*, "daughters," a label some readers regard as diminutive, meant to put her in her place.[53] Male commentators including Waltke, Michael Fox and Raymond Van Leeuwen hasten to explain why no offense should be taken: the term is a mere synonym for "women,"[54] a linguistic parallel to *banim* in v. 28;[55] it honors her family of origin.[56] Regardless of these explanations, and despite

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[52] David R. Blumenthal, "Images of Women in the Hebrew Bible" in *Marriage, Sex and Family in Judaism* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2005), 20.

[53] Diane Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1997), 99.

[54] Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 534.

[55] Raymond Van Leeuwen, *The Book of Proverbs* (NIB 5, Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 263.

[56] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 898.

Waltke's disapproval of such a conclusion as "sour,"[57] the labeling of a woman by men as "daughter" without a reciprocal labeling of men by women as "sons" does project a husband's greater power relative to his wife.

The same is true of the statement in v. 30 regarding favor and beauty: "Favor is false and beauty a vapor." Fox writes that the speaker here couldn't be the husband, because "this would be pompous and patronizing."[58] But is it so impossible for a husband to *be* pompous and patronizing, especially one who so happily consumes his wife and her achievements (11)? Whether the husband or narrator speaks v. 30 (there is some ambiguity), they could be understood to compliment the *eshet chayil,* as if saying, favor and beauty are unimportant as compared to your talents. The sentiment contradicts a common view of women presented in Prov. 11.16: "A woman of favor holds honor…." So it could thereby form an elaboration of v. 29, which asserts all other women pale beside her.

Yet such exercise reveals the speaker as evaluator of women. Whether lacking or excelling in favor and beauty, or whether different qualities altogether are the ones that matter — in any case, the normalizing of male evaluation according to male-determined standards positions these men of the household as possessing considerable power over their wives and daughters even in the domain primarily associated with women. Their judgments shape who their women are expected to be and influence who women will strive to be. Here the "arrogant eye" winks again, resembling Gen. 3.20, where Adam names Eve, asserting power and control in being the one to label and identify her. Be it Genesis or Proverbs 31, this move casts the woman as the "other" with respect to male

[57] Waltke, 534.
[58] Fox, 898.

centrality.

Additional Characters on the Scene

As mentioned above, ambiguity exists concerning the speaker of vv. 29-30. The ancient script does not contain quotation marks that can indicate shifts in speaker. Neither is there here obvious indication of direct speech such as the *vayomer* ("and he said…") of other biblical texts. Most interpreters attribute at least v. 29 to the husband taking over direct speech from the narrator based on the previous line's summarized speech, "he praises her," and the shift in pronominal form referencing the subject from the third person of previous verses, "she," to second person, "you." It would be unusual for a heretofore external narrator to directly address a character within the narrative scene. However such is not impossible, and Proverbs 31 begins with just such liminal locating of narrator both outside and inside the action portrayed within the text; recall our discussion of the v. 1 superscription in chapter 2. Polyphony of the text allows either husband or narrator to be speaking the praise to the wife in v. 29.

Concerning the speaker of v. 30, less agreement exists among scholars as compared to v. 29. This is due to the fact that the subject pronoun switches from second person back to the third person, "she."

> 29. "Many daughters do *chayil*,
> but you, you ascend above them all.
> 30. *Chen* is false and beauty a vapor;
> *Ishah* — fear of Yahweh — she! *She* will be praised.

This switch could indicate return to the narrator as speaker, though such is not required. Just as in v. 29 a narrator in performance could speak both *about* a woman and then *to* a woman, so in v. 30 a husband could in the same breath both compliment his wife directly and then generalize about women. While readers may prefer one option over

the other, the text itself is unfinalizable; either voice could be speaking in either verse. This condition Mieke Bal refers to as "text interference," when a narrator's text and an actor's text are so closely related that distinction by narrative levels can no longer occur.[59]

One effect of this switching and blurring is to call attention to the narrator, because the reader/hearer must pause to disentangle who is speaking among the several options at varying levels: husband, scribal teacher, by-standing wise elder, King Lemuel, or his mother, heaping words of praise. Though rarely recognized as such, the narrator is a "fictional construct" similar to a character.[60] As Monika Fludernik notes, narrators have an image they want to project, perhaps of being smart, competent, wise, and so on.[61] In Proverbs 31, the narrator through blurring of narrative levels intensifies his own involvement in the community and in the outcome of the issues at stake as addressed in Proverbs 31.

Puncturing of narrative levels also forces a reconfiguration of narratees in relation to the scene. If the narrator is no longer outside the scene, but inside, where are the narratees? Do they get drawn in also, do they also become characters before whom the husband/narrator addresses his words? Oral performance of this poem enables envisioning the speaker perhaps in the city gates, perhaps pointing out a passing woman for acclaim, or a grouping of females through contrast to (teasingly?) shame. Dialogism occurs in the polyphonic communication of husband and narrator to multiple audiences at multiple narrative levels.

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[59] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto: U of Toronto, 2009), 56.

[60] David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 53.

[61] Monika Fludernik, "Identity/Alterity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 260.

Intimations of Plot

As Fludernik observes, "Happy couples are not story worthy."[62] Stories must have an angle, some reason for being told, some problem to solve. But the Proverbs 31 *ba'al* and *eshet chayil* are a happy couple, are they not? She laughs about the days to come (25), and he certainly seems content. So where is the story here? We have identified several undercurrents of tension within Proverbs 31, each of which undermines any conception of the Proverbs 31 world as utopia. An unsettled feeling, a problem to resolve occurs in the first verse of the acrostic in the asking but not answering, "… who can find?" Implicit conflict exists in this expression of male desire for what is lacking. Conflict may also be suspected in the lack of interaction between husband and wife throughout most of the poem. The wife is silenced, so we don't really know her perspective on things, and her masculine portrayal raises questions as to what this husband contributes and whether he is valued.

Beyond the marital relationship, readers can detect communal conflict in earlier violent metaphors regarding seizing land (16) and engaging the poor (20), also in the husband's role of legal adjudication and the wife's monitoring of others, as if chaos would result without their imposed order and control and power. It's possible the acrostic of vv. 10-31 responds to Lemuel and his mother's quarrel concerning a king's appropriate behavior, especially toward the poor and oppressed. Such tensions within the text challenge the utopian proclamations of trust (11), all good (12), and no fear (21).

Many definitions of story involve plot as action or sequence of events, however Fludernik argues that such is not strictly necessary for narrative. Anything

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[62] Fludernik, 264.

communicating anthropocentric experience will possess tension forming suspense that seeks to be resolved.[63] "Suspense is created when concrete events are anticipated (prolepsis), and we are curious as to how they came about ..." writes Fludernik. "Suspense is generated by withholding important information…"[64] Readers may ask, what is going to happen to this character, given the world of the text? Will they be all right? Such questions fulminate an "empathetic immersion in the situation."[65] As readers come to know characters and identify with them, they fill in gaps within the text,[66] projecting beyond what is explicitly stated a story of their own making, often imagining worst-case scenarios as means of guarding against danger.[67]

Fludernik's reflections on narrative supply a means of approaching Proverbs 31 narratively with respect to plot. We may ask, given the tensions listed above, is there any detectable or anticipatable action in response to such tensions? We have already mentioned that vv. 10-31 could be a response to the quarrel of vv. 1-9, either the mother's type of woman Lemuel should attach to, or Lemuel's protest against piling all expectations on him for an optimal society. In addition, the ending of the poem, vv. 29-31, can be understood to address the marital and communal tensions of the poem.

Conceiving response to tensions at this point in the poem requires further reflection on honor and shame within the ancient world. We have already recognized that both the husband and his *eshet chayil* possess honor. The husband's is asserted through locating him in a space associated with honor, the city gates, and describing him there in

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[63] Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology,* (London: Routledge, 2009), 5.
[64] Ibid., 46-47.
[65] Ibid., 47.
[66] H. Porter Abbott "Story, Plot, and Narration," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44.
[67] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2012), 67.

ways of acquired honor: being known and sitting with the elders. The wife is associated with honor through her metaphorical description as powerful warrior and deity.

One correction to Malina's view summarized above that has emerged in recent years pertains to gender. Malina held that women were associated primarily with shame, guarding their sexual purity through secluded lives and motherhood. Men jockeyed only with other men for public status. Yet evidence has emerged demonstrating women did in similar manner to men gain and lose honor in the public court of reputation, even in relation to men.[68]

Such conditions raise the specter of whether praise ascribing honor to the wife for activities *not* associated with the traditional female honor-bearing pursuits of sexuality and childbearing could challenge the honor of the husband. Zeba Crook reports that a key feature of the ancient Mediterranean honor-shame system was its conception of honor as limited, not enough to go around, and so in the public court of reputation, one person's gain in honor must be compensated for by another person's loss.[69] Concern for this seems to underlie some scholars thinking on Proverbs 31, as when Thomas McCreesh writes that the *eshet chayil*'s industriousness "correspondingly reduce[s]" the role of the husband to the degree that "ultimately the husband does not have the place of honor in the poem."[70] Joel Biwul, too, laments that the portrayal in Proverbs 31 of the female figure calls for her to be "praised, extolled, honoured, and dignified above [her husband]."[71]

Some might say the husband cannot compete with his own wife for honor,

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[68] Crook, 594.
[69] Ibid., 593.
[70] McCreesh, 28.
[71] Biwul, 35.

because she belongs to him (11) — he is *ba'al*, "owner" or "master," after all — and so any honor incurred by her accomplishments would rebound to him. This is certainly one plausible interpretation of mention of the husband prominent in the gates following description of the wife's success. "She makes a name for him," writes Jo Ann Davidson.[72] On the other hand, mention of the husband could also be understood as one more feature maximizing the wife's honor. As John Hartley opines: "His official role brings honor to his wife."[73]

Any threat to the husband's honor resulting from the wife would spring not from her accomplishments alone but from the masculinity of the metaphors used to describe her, the strong arms and bound loins, her deified warrior persona. Masculinity, which feeds honor, is also publicly enacted and confirmed via relationships, roles and societal institutions[74] that promote a status system in which males dominate females and even, through contest and comparison, other males.[75] To be a man in this society, according to Stephen Moore, is *not* to be a woman, to avoid feminization, affirm the inferiority of women and participate in militarized aggression.[76] To be a man is to possess honor and avoid shame.[77] Yet Proverbs 31 applies to the *eshet chayil* and not her husband terms traditionally affirming masculinity: *chayil,* and *oz,* and so on. Masculinizing the wife could threaten the husband's masculine identity, decreasing his honor in the public court of reputation.

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[72] Jo Ann Davidson, "Women Bear God's Image: Considerations From a Neglected Perspective," *Andrew University Seminary Studies*, 54 no. 1 (2016), 45.

[73] Hartley, 333.

[74] Ovidiu Creanga, "Introduction," in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded,* eds. Ovidiu Creanga and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2014), 4.

[75] Ibid., 6.

[76] Stephen Moore, "Final Reflections on Biblical Masculinity," in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creanga (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 247.

[77] Ibid.

Masculinity under threat — recognizing this undercurrent to the poem supplies a significance not previously recognized to the husband's speaking up in verses 29-30. According to Crook, in the ancient, collectivistic culture, if the public considered a challenge to have occurred between community members, then such challenge would need to be responded to with riposte or the one challenged would lose honor, be shamed.[78] Close examination of v. 29 and v. 30 invites understanding them as not a disinterested expression of praise but one motivated by the husband's self-interest, reasserting his masculinity and guarding honor. Verses 29 and 30 both exhibit wit and rhetorical one-upmanship. Verse 29 works a pun in employing *chayil* to reference both commercial profit-making and military conquest while complimenting his wife. It manages to both elevate other men's wives by acknowledging that they "do *chayil"* and yet to reduce them by labeling them "daughters" and arguing that his own wife exceeds them, effectively a version of, "Mine is better than yours!" The characterization of his wife as ascending higher than other women, or surpassing, or besting them at battle, in light of concerns for threatened honor and masculinity, can be understood as a projection of the husband's own desire and need to rank above his peers. So important is it for the husband to make this point that he even contradicts the praise of his wife extended by the narrator at outset of the poem, that an *eshet chayil* is rare and hard to find. Now the husband claims there are many wives of *chayil,* whom his wife exceeds.

As for v. 30, it resembles a riposte to a prevailing cultural attribution of honor to women based on their pleasing graces and beauty. The husband names the commonly accepted values of favor and beauty but undercuts them as false, a vapor, and then

[78] Crook, 593.

promotes a superior virtue possessed by his wife, fear of Yahweh. Point for him.

"Words can be expressions of the masculine imperative to dominate," writes Moore.[79] According to Hilary Lipka, several alternatives to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity as strong warrior exist in Proverbs, one being skills in oration, including persuasiveness, wisdom, and honesty in speech.[80] In the Proverbs 31 acrostic, similar qualities have just been ascribed to the *eshet chayil*: "She opens her mouth in wisdom and the teaching of *chesed* is on her tongue" (26). It would be no surprise then for a man concerned with honor to feel compelled to demonstrate his own abilities in elocution. Whereas the husband joins the narrator and his sons in ascribing honor to the *eshet chayil*, he also acts to preserve his own stockpile and to put her in her place through being the one to evaluate her. In this way the text exhibits ambivalence concerning whether the *eshet chayil*'s accumulation of honor enhances the husband's honor or threatens it.

The Work of This Narrative Arc

Having identified the narrative features of setting, characterization, plot, and dramatic tension, let us consider the work of such features for the ancient community reciting, receiving, pondering it. In chapter three, we discussed how the *eshet chayil* serves as role model for men as well as women. Verses 23-30 expand the *eshet chayil*'s benefit to husbands and households to the entire community. So writes Madipoane Masenya, "Because of the wisdom and power of those operating from the house, the public sphere or 'the gates' flourish."[81] Thus even more reason is supplied for "her

[79] Moore, 248.

[80] Hilary Lipka, "Masculinities in Proverbs: An Alternative to the Hegemonic Ideal," in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*, ed. Ovidiu Creagna and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 97-98.

[81] Masenya, 105.

house" to pitch in and produce. In this way, vv. 23-30 aid the community in figuring out who they are. As the text projects, Yehudites are hardworking and successful; their actions, like those of the *eshet chayil*, are driven by the communal priority of *chesed*.

Often, identity construction occurs through distinguishing oneself from others. Already Proverbs 31 has employed this technique in Lemuel's mother warning against women and advocating a posture toward the poor, through which readers grasp that Lemuel and those who identify with him are not women and not poor. Similarly vv. 10-22's utopian world conveys that the ideal husband and wife *aren't* servants because they *have* servants. Such features bring to mind the function of stories to create and play with boundaries. That Proverbs 31 engages multiple boundaries is powerfully signaled in its twice-mention of the city gates. Their foremost purpose is to establish and keep separate insiders and outsiders. Yet in supplying passage, city gates undo their own dividing function. They form a liminal space in which passers-through are neither insider nor outsider.

This double function occurs also in the imaging of *eshet chayil* as deity. Not only is she blatantly described as such through language also ready noted above, but the husband and sons even worship her. So argues Wolters in noting the hymn-like crediting of her creative acts and the similarity between *halel'ha* ("praise her") (28, 31) and *haleluya* ("praise God").[82] The blurring of female and deity is unusual, unexpected and some think extreme, leading to interpretations of the *eshet chayil* as not a human wife at all but wisdom personified as a goddess. Certainly such a depiction can be tied to Lady Wisdom of Proverbs 1-9.[83]

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[82] Wolters, 450.

[83] Bernhard Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: An Israelite Goddess Redefined* (New York:

A particularly vivid connection between the *eshet chayil* and deity occurs in v. 30: "*Ishah* — fear of Yahweh — she! *She* will be praised." This line is usually translated, "A woman *who fears* Yahweh will be praised." In this traditional rendering, fearing Yahweh is just one more complimentary feature of the *eshet chayil,* a type of: *She's all that, and this, too!* Much scholarly commentary expresses concern as to the abruptness of this first mention of Yahweh in Proverbs 31, its seeming incompatibility with previously celebrated practical skills. Scholars have speculated as to whether the mention of Yahweh might be a late emendation.[84] Masenya attempts a defense by interpreting the mention of Yahweh as indicating a holistic worldview in which the secular is sacred.[85] However, recognizing the previously occurring allusions to Yahweh and divinity as we have here makes it less surprising to see an overt reference to Yahweh in v. 30.

Furthermore, the choice to render *yiroth yahweh* in the adjectival sense of "who fears Yahweh" is grammatically questionable. Fox acknowledges that "normally" *yiroth yahweh* is a construct form meaning "fear of Yahweh."[86] However, he argues, understanding *yiroth* as "fear of" in v. 30 "does not fit here."[87] He designates *yiroth* "a contracted form of the fem. const. ptpc. equivalent to [*yere'at*] 'fearer of.' "[88] It is unfortunate that Fox does not state why it does not work to understand *yiroth yahweh* as "fear of Yahweh." The phrase appears several dozen times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, where it is unproblematically translated as such. In her own monograph on *Proverbs*, Christine Yoder tackles this challenge. She recognizes *ishah* as a noun existing

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Pilgrim, 1986); Judith E McKinlay, *Gendering Wisdom the Host: Biblical Invitations to Eat and Drink* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1996).

[84] For discussion, see Masenya, 106-107.

[85] Masenya, 152.

[86] Fox, 899.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid.

in apposition with its neighbor, the noun phrase, "fear of Yahweh."[89] Rather than understanding *yiroth yahweh* as an adjective modifying *ishah*, she argues, it should be considered a substantive, establishing an equivalency between *ishah and yiroth yahweh*.[90] This grammatical construction occurs elsewhere in relation to the specific phrase, "fear of Yahweh." Ps. 111.10 reads, "The beginning of wisdom [is] the fear of Yahweh." Taking that pattern and applying it to Prov. 31.30 produces, "A woman/wife [is] the fear of Yahweh." To Yoder's argument may be added further diagnosis of the relation of second nouns to first nouns in apposition. According to Waltke and Michael O'Conner, the second noun can provide further information about the first noun, identify the material the first noun is composed of, reveal the quality or character of the first noun, or identify their office.[91] Thus fearing Yahweh is not merely one of the *eshet chayil*'s many virtues, added to the pile. Rather, in all of her previously described activity, supplying plunder (11), scheming for land (16), guarding her family (27), and so on, the *eshet chayil* epitomizes the fear of Yahweh.

This equivalence between a female and "fear of Yahweh" in v. 30 is not the same as the earlier metaphorizing of the *eshet chayil* as a deity, even Yahweh himself (25-27). The earlier image, as stated above, may have urged men to aspire to the behavior exemplified by the *eshet chayil* and to value such work when performed by women. Equating the *eshet chayil* with "fear of Yahweh" is similarly directed but through different means. The phrase, "fear of Yahweh" occurs many times in the Hebrew Bible, and in Proverbs in particular. Davidson identifies it as the inclusio delimiting the main

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[89] Christine Yoder, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 297.
[90] Ibid., 297.
[91] Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 229–232.

theme or "motto" of the entire book.[92] In Proverbs "fear of Yahweh" appears in teachings that "offer and establish norms for a rational and purposeful life which rest on the experience and conviction that the good brings with it good fortune and affluence while the bad entails disaster."[93] The phrase has a concrete, practical focus that recognizes what is at stake in personal and communal choices, that these can lead to either wealth or poverty, life or death. Implicit is the belief that God himself will intervene to ensure that consequences match the deeds.

The Proverbs 31 acrostic begins with the impression that men must prioritize seeking and possessing an *eshet chayil* as if seeking a jewel (10). Likening the *eshet chayil* to fear of Yahweh at poem's end reinforces this fervor. Elsewhere in biblical texts the fear of Yahweh is also urged as something men should pursue. It is the source of tremendous power (2 Chron. 1.14), wisdom (Prov. 15.37), knowledge (1.7), security (19.23) and wealth (22.4). The message of v. 30 is that men ought to pursue an industrious, clever, honor-enhancing wife with the same devotion they should pursue the fear of Yahweh. Conversely, they ought to pursue and practice "fear of Yahweh" with the same fervor they desire a most wonderful wife. They, too, as fearers of Yahweh must act strategically to provide for and protect their own. Such sentiments fulfill yet another of Arthur Frank's functions of stories, to inspire toward the good.

Gender Boundaries and Liminality

Another boundary reinforcing and transgressing that occurs in vv. 23-30 pertains gender and gender roles. In our earlier discussion of characterization, we touched upon

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[92] Davidson, 35.

[93] Horst Balz and Günther Wanke, "Φοβέω, Φοβέομαι Φόβος, Δέος," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 202.

how locations associated with husband and wife impact their respective identities. The husband through being located in the city gates becomes associated with honor, public participation, adjudication, and leisure. His wife is not placed in the city gates, and, although honored in other ways, is consequently not associated with these qualities. Instead, through her connection to the home, she becomes associated with provision and protection.

These conceptions of gates and homes in Proverbs 31 are no accident, nor are they entirely benign. With regard to the city gates in Proverbs 31, as male identity becomes associated with authority and honor, so also the city gates become associated with the same because that is where males congregate. A mutually reinforcing identity loop develops as males, and not females, become expected to occupy spaces of authority and honor that befit their identities, spaces such as the elders' bench. Through Proverbs 31's textual expressions of such "embedded practice,"[94] men gain sanction to inhabit the space of the city gates and behave in it in particular ways while women are constrained from occupying and acting within that space. Men only being associated with the gates produces an expectation and belief that men belong in public spaces, occupy and own public spaces in ways that women do not. This becomes the ideology within the world of the text and that of those affected by it. "Space indeed speaks, but it does not tell all," writes Lefebvre. "Above all, it prohibits."[95]

To Masenya, this picture in Proverbs 31 resembles practice in many traditional African cultures today as well as ancient Mediterranean societies. Meeting places reserved for men exclude women so as to preserve a leadership role for men. Women

[94] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005), 10.
[95] Lefebvre, 142.

appear only in cases of need.[96] Massey labels this condition of space extending to certain social groups more power than others to move and to direct mobility, "power geometry."[97] Power geometry pertains not only to how people act in a given space, but also to who determines how people act and how the different groups relate to each other with regard to exercising power or being subject to it.[98] She writes, "There are groups who, although doing a lot of physical moving, are not 'in charge' of the process in the same way."[99] This fits the depiction of the *eshet chayil* as extremely busy at her tasks and toil, but not exercising decision-making authority at the communal level. Verses 23-30 fit Lefebvre's observation of lived spaces as "a tacit agreement, a non-aggression pact" in which relationships are normalized into an unwritten rule that "there is to be no fighting over who should occupy a particular spot."[100] In space, ideology forms through ideas expressed in practice.[101] Osiek notes the practical impact of such gendered activities in space, observing, "To the degree that one sex has closer same-sex networks of communication, it will have greater social power than in a society in which it does not have the same kinds of systems."[102] In Proverbs 31, the husband in the gates enjoys this benefit.

I mentioned that the conceptions of gates and homes in Proverbs 31 is no accident. We know this because of indications in the text that although the *eshet chayil* is not specifically located in the city gates, her activities as described must require her

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[96] Masenya, 155.
[97] Massey, "Power," 62.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Lefebvre, "Production," 56.
[101] Cresswell, 157.
[102] Osiek, 334.

presence there. The open square of the city gates complex served as a popular spot for trade,[103] especially with foreigners (*kena'any*) who must come and go through the gates to contact buyers and sellers inside (24). Yoder reports that Persian-era women at Elephantine occupied marketplaces, buying, selling, and bartering.[104] Several times Proverbs 31 mentions the *eshet chayil*'s participation in trade (14, 18, 24). To invoke Lefebvre's tripartite frame: The city gates are *conceived* as occupied by men of honor, yet also *perceived* as occupied by women of trade. The incongruence between these two dimensions of space points to the space of the city gates being not static or "natural" but actively constructed. It suggests a pushback by some community members against women's presence, positioning, and power. Persian-era migration, shifts in leadership, developing urban areas and trade could all be unsettling. Fear can stimulate an assertion of power, reinforcing social connections, including hierarchies. According to Carol Meyers, the power relations reflected in Proverbs 31 resemble actual conditions of ancient Israel.[105] Using the term, "heterarchy," Meyers argues that power between men and women was continually being negotiated to shape society.[106] Male dominance existed in such areas as the military, property ownership, and control of female sexuality,[107] but it was not universally hierarchical or static.[108]

Chapter three noted Ehud Ben Zvi's speculation that perhaps the culture's negative view of trade explains why Proverbs 31 depicts the wife and not the husband

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[103] Frese, 148.

[104] Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2001), 59.

[105] Carol Meyers, *Re-discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 198.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid., 199.

[108] Ibid., 193.

engaging in trade, namely, sparing him dishonor of association with it even as they enjoy its benefits. This dynamic may also explain why the *eshet chayil*'s engaging trade is not specifically located in the city gates, even though that is where in reality it likely would occur. Because the city gates are *conceived* as the space of honor and associated with men, keeping the activities of trade within the city gates unfocused within the text spares any hit to the honor of this prestigious husband that such activity by his wife in his space of honor would incur to him. We see here evidence of the text working to actively construct a boundary as resistance to the lived experience of persons in space. In this v. 23 differs from other places in Proverbs where such negative qualities as "folly" are acknowledged to also occupy the city gates (Prov. 8.13-15).

Not Spaces, but Speaking

A second way that vv. 23-30 is setting and unsettling gender boundaries concerns not spaces but speaking. As noted previously, even though the text depicts the *eshet chayil* as extremely powerful, it also promotes husband over wife by having him do all the talking. Sons, too, "rise up and bless her," but daughters do not speak.

In terms of dialogic communal expression of gender boundaries, a particularly complex utterance occurs in v. 30, the first line: "*Chen* is false and beauty a vapor" (30). As Fox conceives, while still valuing beauty, the line articulates its limitations.[109] In one sense the remark comes unexpectedly, since it is hard to believe a man so concerned with honor would not value grace and beauty in a wife, given their importance to women's identity and honor, which would reflect well on him. Perhaps the verse fits Bakhtin's description of the "sideways glance," an utterance that anticipates another's words, and so

[109] Fox, 898.

should be heard as a version of the comical dialogue:

> Q: "But is she pretty?"
> A: "She has a great personality!"

We mentioned above in our discussion of conflict how this line could form part of the riposte to a husband's perceived challenge to his honor, in which he undercuts qualities commonly valued in women by promoting his wife's overall excellence in epitomizing the fear of Yahweh. Considering the effect of aging on the body, describing beauty as *hevel*, a "vapor, breath, idol,"[110] seems accurate, and so the second half of the line can be understood to channel an audience away from valuing outward appearance and toward inner traits.

But the first phrase of this line — *"Chen* is false*"* (*sheker hachen*) — is trickier to understand. What is this quality, and why does it merit being judged a liar, or false?[111] Fox translates *chen* as "comeliness," effectively a synonym of beauty.[112] Waltke, joining several prominent translations, renders *chen* as "charm,"[113] not exactly the same as beauty. Charm conveys an effect of pleasure upon an audience, for example, due to witty banter or smiling countenance. *Chen* appears several dozen times in the Hebrew Bible, and when applied to women, positively so: "A woman of *chen* gets honor…" (Prov. 11.16). *Chen* was desired and expected of women; divorce could follow if women failed to display this quality or attain this response from their husbands (Deut. 24.1).

This is the quality associated in Proverbs 31 with women and deemed false, a liar. In the line's second phrase, *hevel* also possesses connotations of falsity.[114] These are blunt

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[110] Koehler, 236–237.
[111] Koehler, 1648.
[112] Fox, 898.
[113] Waltke, "Role," 24.
[114] Given that idols are things that do not really exist, so Koehler, 237.

and cynical words. They join a host of others in Proverbs warning men against women, or at least certain types of women, including Lemuel's mother in Prov. 31.3. Even within a poem praising an ideal wife, a negative judgment about a quality habitually attributed to women contributes to a compromised gender identity for women by associating women with that negative quality. Logically, from "*chen* is false" it follows that women, who are expected to be *chen*, are also false, cannot be trusted, and particularly in those moments when they are at their most pleasing, most attractive. So another work of these words could be to warn men of women's devious ways. In terms of impact, they likely foment distrust on the part of men toward women.

But what actually is *chen*? An interesting aspect of the word is that it almost always appears in the context of a relationship in which there is an imbalance of power, where one party stands to benefit from the goodwill of another who has greater authority, position, or power. As a result, the lesser party acts ingratiatingly toward the greater in order to gain some benefit. Women's relationships with men frequently fit this frame. For example, Esther is several times associated with *chen*.[115] Often *chen* appears as some variation of the expression, "to find favor in [someone]'s eyes."

Like many identity-constructing characteristics, *chen* is not merely an innate quality independent of others' awareness of it; *chen* must be recognized and even extended by others, like honor. *Chen* can also apply to men. Joseph and his brothers flatter Pharaoh and in response they find "favor" (*chen*) (Exod. 12.36), are granted land and saved from starvation. David plays the harp before King Saul and is judged as finding "favor" in his eyes (1 Sam. 16.22), gaining special status in Saul's household.

[115] Esther 2.15, 2.17, 5.2, 5.8, 7.3, 8.5.

Recognizing the power disparity inherent to *chen* can expand the meaning of v. 30a. Where there is a power disparity, compliments and such really *are* false because the one with more social capital never really knows if the person with less really means what they are saying, or if they are saying it in order to gain favor or to avoid its loss. Underneath the good feelings that come from *chen*'s flattery and pleasing ways lies uncertainty. Verse 30 is clearly focalized via the husband, because males, having power, are the ones before whom *chen* is performed in the hope of evoking positive response. Only they could experience it as false, not women performing *chen*, who presumably have a purpose for their behavior and would not be the ones deceived by it.

Given the male audience, therefore, struggling to locate worthy women, perhaps in saying, "favor is false," the husband/narrator is not reversing a prevailing opinion but actually confirming one, stating outright something that, based on males' experience and dominant cultural narratives, they all take for granted as true. In biblical stories the actions of female characters frequently involve deception. Rebekah schemes to steal the first-born blessing (Genesis 27). Potiphar's wife gets Joseph thrown in jail (Genesis 39). Shiprah and Puah protect Hebrew women through falsehoods (Exodus 1), and so on. In light of this cultural trope, the line of v. 30a fits Carole Fontaine's assessment of a "saying-appraisal," a saying or proverb performed that assesses a situation in "socially accepted ways."[116] Signs of proverb performance include a seemingly out of context interjection of figurative language and appeals to tradition,[117] both of which we could consider to be present here. Often speakers interject a saying appraisal in conflictual

[116] Carole R. Fontaine, "The proof of the pudding: Proverbs and gender in the performance arena," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29, no. 2 (Dec 2004), 183.

[117] Ibid., 163.

situations[118] or when they perceive themselves to be disadvantaged in a status disparity.[119] We have already noted that our husband may be reacting to the threat of his wife's super-elevated status. If the audience will assent to this communal proverb, goes the strategy, then they are more likely to ease toward also assenting to whatever is the speaker's main point.[120] Fontaine writes of this practice, "Group solidarity is maintained yet the speaker has voiced a (perhaps subversive) point of view, all the while from within a 'safety net' of shared assumptions."[121]

While the husband's purpose may be to win a verbal challenge, the comment also allows the listening community to ponder the social dynamics of power imbalances. Verse 10 asserts that a husband fully trusts his *eshet chayil* — but v. 30 acknowledges that men can be deceived, and by women. Men expect safety and service from their women, who in terms of honor, authority, and privilege are lower and weaker, thus not a threat. Yet women, it turns out, can have their own purposes. They act autonomously, as biblical narratives and poems detail. When they do and reveal they are not solely about pleasing their lord, the surprise experienced feels like betrayal, deserving the judgment of falseness, deceit. Far from a picture of placidity, the text conveys anxiety husbands feel toward wives.

As a communal expression, *sheker hachen* can focalize not only the betrayal experience of those possessing more power, but also that of the less powerful persons who rely on *chen*. Melissa Jackson has explained that Hebrew Bible "trickster"

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[118] Ibid., 183.

[119] Carole Fontaine, *Smooth Words : Women, Proverbs, and Performance in Biblical Wisdom* (London, New York: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 59.

[120] Fontaine, "Smooth," 158. Also "Proof," 188.

[121] Fontaine, "Smooth," 165.

characters, often female, deploy deception out of desperation.[122] They are generally low status people with few options for obtaining their needs.[123] When *chen* fools an Israelite hero, as Delilah tricks Samson (Judges 16), the woman becomes accursed villain. But when it targets Israel's enemies, as Jael inviting Sisera to her tent (Judges 4,5), the audience thrills. The community celebrates deceitful exercise of *chen* when it rescues Israelite heroes from death (Rahab) or the community at large from annihilation (Esther), and so on.

Within the social mindscape of post-exilic Israel, then, *chen* actually has a *positive* function. This small, elite community is the weaker party in relation to the Persian empire and neighboring peoples. Such explains why the community producing biblical texts images itself as female — for example, in Lamentations 1, Jeremiah 3, Ezekiel 16, 23, and Proverbs 31. Survival is at stake, so the Yehudite community, like women, must act to gain the favor of those with favors to bestow. Sometimes this involves flattery, sometimes trickery. "Favor is false and beauty a vapor; *Ishah* — fear of Yahweh — she! *She* will be praised." Throughout the Proverbs 31 acrostic, strategy, skill, and cleverness have been praised. In light of the communal context of vulnerability, v. 30 as communal expression equates the exercise of *chen* and beauty — recognizing their falseness — with the fear of Yahweh. Like Esther, like Ruth, like Joseph and many others, heroes of Israel must deploy these qualities also for the sake of *chesed*.

Conclusion

This chapter identified meanings of vv. 23-30 that emerge when attending to

[122] Melissa Jackson, "Lots Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters in the Hebrew Bible Patriarchal Narratives," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 98 (2002), 32.
[123] Ibid.

narrative elements: the setting(s), characterization and dramatic tension. It argued that characterizing the *eshet chayil* as supreme possessor of honor sets up the husband to perceive and respond to an implicit challenge to his own honor. This he does via a riposte-style speech act. He elevates his wife over others and confirms his position of dominance and power. As the earlier verse groupings of vv. 1-9 and vv. 10-22, so here the interpersonal conflict allows the community producing and rehearsing this text to surface tensions in their midst: who has power, wields it, and where? Is everyone pulling their weight in the communal effort to survive and thrive? The *eshet chayil* is set up not only as a model wife for men to marry but as a role model Israelite for all to imitate. She is the fear of Yahweh.

CHAPTER FIVE

PROV. 31.31: COMMUNAL COERCIONS

> 31: Give to her from [Celebrate her for] the fruit of her hands,
> and may they [they will] praise her in the gates, her works.

In v. 31, we finally reach the end of this acrostic, this chapter, and this book of Proverbs. According to Richard Clifford, here the husband and sons of v. 28 address the "public assembly."[1] Preceding verses rehearse extensively the *eshet chayil*'s commendable traits, but v. 31 no longer indulges third-person assessment, pivoting instead to issue a direct command. In this, it harkens to the chapter's opening lines, where Lemuel's mother addresses her son with forthright words, instructing, correcting, even rebuking. Verse 31 thus conveys an element of closure in forming an inclusio, and it does so not only for the chapter as a whole but for the smaller unit of the acrostic in supplying a final reference to the *eshet chayil* introduced in v. 10. It also forms an inclusio with the larger unit of the book in its mention of city gates, which serve as setting in Proverbs' opening chapter: "At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks her words (1.21).

Assessed according to the genre of encomium,[2] or heroic poetry,[3] v. 31 completes a litany of praise, and this is generally how scholars receive it; the last line says, "praise,"

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[1] Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 277.

[2] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 903.

[3] Albert Wolters, "Proverbs 31:10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form-Critical Analysis," *Vetus Testamentum* 38.4 (1988).

after all. So Bruce Waltke writes, "… as a fitting climax to his eulogy, the poet and sage shifts from recording the wise family's spontaneous accolades (28-29) to obliging all in the gate to extol her."[4] Viewed as narrative-like discourse, as we undertake here via socio-narratological interpretive lens, v. 31 resembles what Mikhail Bakhtin so admired about the novelistic word, that it "registers with extreme subtlety the tiniest shifts and oscillations of the social atmosphere."[5] The call for action in v. 31 — setting aside for the moment what that action entails — constitutes just such a subtle registration of the social atmosphere, one that conveys: *something is lacking*, otherwise the thing advocated would not need to be advocated. Whereas presumption of encomium or similar genre causes hearers to filter out what does not fit with praise, a presumption of drama receives these lines in light of any narrative elements that have come before, especially tension or conflict. Conflict draws readers into a text, investing them with concern for characters and pulling them through the text's chronology, as readers wonder what will happen and read for resolution.

As earlier identified, the tensions and conflict of Proverbs 31 include the quarrel between mother and son, the pressure experienced by King Lemuel to behave in certain ways personally and publicly, the utter inadequacy of these royals' efforts to understand and respond to the conditions experienced by the poor and needy. They include also the seeming impossibility of finding an *eshet chayil*, the *eshet chayil*'s masculinity potentially displacing and/or shaming her man, her wealth seemingly taken from the very destitute whom Lemuel's mother advocates Lemuel speak up for. Mention of not fearing,

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[4] Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 536.

[5] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 300.

of laughing, and of rejecting laziness suggest a community well acquainted with and actively resisting threats of starvation, homelessness, and exposure to the elements.

This is the context into which the v. 31 exhortation rings. Is it, after all, a final word of praise? If so, is it *only* that, or does it also speak to these identified tensions and conflicts? This chapter engages a close reading of v. 31 that attends to its possibilities for contributing to or responding to the tensions and conflicts present in previous portions of chapter 31. Rather than resolving puzzling bits in ways that preserve the priority of praise, we seek to understand them as communicative morsels contributing the interests and perspectives of diverse members of the ancient society. Whereas a traditional hermeneutic advances one meaning only for an utterance, here we continue to follow Bakhtin's preference for polyphony, a multiplicity of unmerged voices sounding different parts, believing this improves upon understanding the "full meaning of the word."[6] Just as an author of a polyphonic text will strive "to expose and develop all the semantic possibilities embedded in a given point of view,"[7] so will we as interpreting readers.

Polyphonic Command

One word choice that aids in recognizing the text's narrative arc concerns the very first word: *tenu*. Masoretic markings render the letters into an inflection of *natan*,[8] meaning, "give," and so the line is often translated, "Give to her of the fruit of her hands…" But others disagree with the Masoretes' judgment and have argued that the first

[6] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Dostoyevsky's Dialogue," *Soviet Literature* 2 (1971), 139.

[7] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 69. Accessed January 7, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

[8] Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 244. Also Waltke, 514.

word actually derives from *tanah*,[9] meaning "to sing or extol."[10] Deborah's song in Judges 5, a warrior hymn celebrating a female's achievement, also contains *tenu* (11).[11] In this case, the line in v. 31 ought to be, "Extol her for the fruit of her hands"[12] or "Celebrate what her hands achieve."[13] Such an understanding fits Mark Sneed's categorization of much wisdom literature as rhetorically "epideictic," involving not a call to action but instead praising or blaming a person, event, or idea.[14]

However, Michael Fox argues that *tanah* does not actually mean "sing" or "extol," but, more closely, "recount," "repeat" or "rehearse," and in v. 31, "recount to her from the fruit…" does not make sense.[15] Some interpreters do understand *tenu* as *natan*, but even so interpret it in this context and based on synonyms employed elsewhere[16] as "extol" rather than "give."[17] According to Fox, such usage requires a direct object of "honor" or some similar facet, so understanding *tenu* as "extol," does not fit in v. 31, especially as paired with the preposition *m-*.[18] Based on *tenu* in Ps. 28.4, Fox explains its meaning in v. 31 as "give her what she deserves."[19]

Such an understanding could shift classification of this line from "epideictic" to another rhetorical type. Sneed identifies two other ancient types of public argumentation,

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[9] See Murphy, 244, Waltke, 514, Wolters, 449, or Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 277.

[10] Bruce K. Waltke, "The Role of the 'Valiant Wife' in the Marketplace," *Crux* (35, no. 3 1999), 24.

[11] Also Jdgs. 11.40.

[12] Waltke, " 'Valiant Wife'," 24.

[13] Murphy, 244.

[14] Mark Sneed, *The Social World of the Sages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 250.

[15] Fox, 899. HALOT agrees, offering "recount" as most certain meaning. Ludwig Koehler, et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1759–1761.

[16] e.g. Ps. 96.7 employs *yahav* in declaring, "Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength."

[17] Christine Yoder, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 297; William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 670.

[18] Fox, 899.

[19] Ibid.

"judicial rhetorical" and "deliberative rhetorical."[20] *Judicial rhetoric* was employed in court settings to condemn or defend persons accused.[21] We have previously discussed concerning v. 23 the mention of city gates and sitting with elders suggesting a legal scene, and gates are mentioned again here in v. 31. In light of this contextual detail, *tenu lah* — "give to her" — holds potential for the line forming an appeal, or a judgment rendered in response to appeal. In I Kings, a story of two mothers arguing over one living son uses this identical inflected verb, once when one mother pleads, and again when King Solomon renders judgment in her favor (3.25-28).

As for *deliberative rhetoric*, Sneed describes this as that which "focuses on expediency and attempts to persuade an audience to engage in a particular action."[22] It is future-oriented and takes place in public assemblies. Sneed claims, "There is no deliberative rhetoric in the wisdom literature because it does not attempt to call people to take action for a particular cause."[23] One wonders, however, whether Prov. 31.31 constitutes an exception to this rule. Fox argues that in light of the mention of "the fruit of her hands" and the overall economic emphasis of the poem, "give" promotes material recognition of the *eshet chayil* by the community.[24] Such would fit Sneed's definition of deliberative rhetoric urging action for a particular cause.

Bearing in mind oral performance, we must remember that *tenu* would sound equally like either "extol/rehearse" or "give." Taking a dialogic approach permits acknowledging multiple meanings contributing to the communal work of the text. As

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[20] Sneed, 247.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 248.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Fox, 899.

"extol/rehearse," *tenu* makes the verse a summarizing repetition of the main themes of the poem: that the *eshet chayil* is a community producer of material prosperity and ought to be honored as such. As "give," *tenu* voices lack and need. It interjects new action, new actors, new attitudes to be inferred.

Parallelism

Similar to the ambiguity of *tenu*, the poetic pattern of parallelism contributes polyphony to this text. Verse 31's parallelism places verbs and nouns in roughly the same position in each line. One tricky aspect of parallelism is that, whereas identifying antithetical parallelism is fairly easy, distinguishing between synonymous and synthetic/progressive parallelism can be difficult.[25] Synonymous parallelism is the go-to presumption among biblical commentators, perhaps for convenience, because synonymous parallelism can aid in understanding one tricky phrasing through comparison with its parallel. But judgments as to what is synonymous parallelism often seem arbitrary or based solely on tradition. Regarding v. 31, for example, William McKane presumes synonymous parallelism when he appeals to his interpretation of the second line ("deeds should be publicly acknowledged and acclaimed") as "confirming" his interpretation of the first line: "give her credit for her achievements."[26] Yet this is circular reasoning. Readers do not *a priori* know that the second line is synonymous to the first. The parallelism could be of synthetic/progressive type, and if so, by assuming the parallelism is synonymous, then McKane, and any others making this move, fails to

[25] *Synonymous parallelism* reinforces a concept via both lines of a couplet saying basically the same thing. *Antithetical parallelism* uses opposite images to reinforce the same point in both lines. In *synthetic* or *progressive* parallelism, the second line completes or extends the idea proffered in the first. See Sneed, 223-224.

[26] McKane, 670.

look for or see the possible meanings that synthetic/progressive parallelism could contribute.

Two lines of a parallel construction can actually modify each other in infinite ways.[27] Regarding Prov. 31.31, enticing possibilities arise if the second line is considered as a progressive parallelism completing, or further developing, the first. Consider the verse as reading: *Give to her from the fruit of her hands, and [THEN] they will praise her in the gates, her works.* Such injects a foreshadowing of action over time if line (b) is understood to take place as a *result* of line (a). It shifts the subject and focus of the line from the woman praised to treatment of her and to consequences occurring as a result of this treatment. Often the final word in the second colon of a parallelism contains special emphasis. For v. 31, "her works" would be that pounded theme. Viewing v. 31 with such emphasis and in light of progressive parallelism produces a different meaning than the assumption that the lines are synonymous variations on the general theme of praise for a woman. Instead, with "her works" at the end, productivity becomes the actual treasure being sought.

Oral Performance

As mentioned earlier, Proverbs 31 developed in a time of interdependence between orality and script.[28] Although the visual significance of the acrostic form and of chiasms show an origin in script, vv. 10-31's many alliterations and repeated allusions to orality also evidence public oral performance. We have already noted regarding *tenu* how oral performance of Proverbs 31 could influence meaning, as an audience could assume

[27] Sneed, 224.

[28] Robert D. Miller, "The Performance of Oral Tradition in Ancient Israel," in *Contextualizing Israel's Sacred Writings*, ed. Brian Schmidt (Atlanta, SBL Press, 2015), 181.

either *tanah* or *nathan*, or both, when hearing *tenu*. This oral polyphony of final verse pairs well with that of *massa* in v. 1 discussed at the beginning of this project.

Inflections and intonations also impact meanings in performance. Regarding v. 31, each word if emphasized over the others produces a different meaning. "*Give*!" when emphasized can imply, "stop holding back!" "To *her*!" could intend, "not *him*; he has enough already!" and so on. We ought also to consider the command of "give" within the context of the preceding phrase: "— she! *She* will be praised" (30b). With the two-time feminine pronoun supplying its own emphasis, "Give to her" may be read as logical result or application of the preceding insistence on praise. So here words become bound to actions called for by and among the audience. Preserving possibilities based on intonation supplies yet another means for us to participate in the egalitarian approach to narrative that Bakhtin admired in Dostoevsky, that he "brought together ideas and worldviews, which in real life were absolutely estranged and deaf to one another, and forced them to quarrel."[29]

As earlier verses, v. 31 does not specify who speaks these lines, and hearers may imagine several possibilities. Following the earlier pattern of transgressing narrative levels, perhaps these words are uttered at the level of the narrator, shifting gaze from the family described to directly address an audience, a means of indicating to them the moral of the story. One character unlikely is the *eshet chayil* herself, since the line reads, "give to *her*," likely the *eshet chayil*, primary subject of the poem, who would not be expected to refer to herself in the third person. The poem, then, consistent with previous verses denies to the *eshet chayil* her own opportunity to speak.

[29] Bakhtin, "Problems," 91.

So who might the speaker be? Recall Bakhtin's assertion that lines within a text can be dialogic, responding to each other in many different ways. A particularly strong signal of such is when one utterance seems to interrupt another.[30] A shift in speech or in subject addressed can constitute just such an interruption.[31] We have already noted such shifting occurring in the mother-son quarrel of vv. 1-9 and between v. 28 and v. 29 and then again between v. 29 and v. 30. Such occurs again in v. 31 with the initiation of second-person direct command. Possibilities for speaker depend on the narrative level at which these words take place. Are they at the level of this idealized family? If so, v. 31 might wrap up the husband's riposte in vv. 28-29 to the challenge to his honor of previous lines equating his wife to a deity.

Or, in light of suspected tensions between husband and wife, perhaps an observant community member is responding here to a scene playing out before him, taking on a mediating role, directing the husband in what he owes his wife. Previous to this verse, the husband's action is the last action described (28: "he praises her"). So, alternatively, in v. 31 a new speaker may be advocating men of the community to imitate this husband in treating their wives with a similarly generous spirit. On the other hand, if v. 29 is understood as a husband's riposte, then in v. 31 some challenger may be responding in opposition to the husband's riposte by implying that husbands/the community overall do *better* than the *eshet chayil'*s husband by not just giving *words* of praise, but by taking action to support and reward wives' industry *materially*. In the book of Ruth the women of Bethlehem supply an example of interjected advocacy in city gates through their words supporting Naomi (4.17).

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[30] Ibid., 205.
[31] Ibid.

Even the *eshet chayil,* it turns out after all, cannot be completely discounted as speaker, considering the abruptness of the shift in subject and address. Perhaps after all the male rumination replete with subtle tensions of previous verses the *eshet chayil* breaks in to resolve these tensions with a demonstration of "the teaching of *chesed*" (26) for which she is so well known, drawing from her own situation to advocate for herself in the third person or for her worn-out sisters.

Alternatively, the final line could also circle back to Lemuel's mother, forming an inclusio of voice. Whereas in vv. 1-9 she advocates for social welfare via a top-down approach by speaking to her son concerning his kingly role, in v. 31 she would be promoting more of a bottom-up approach by advocating that laborers receive their due. In such case the female voice crying out, in its being *heard,* counters the invisibility of the female body not being located or *seen* within the gates.

In addition to speaker identification impacting meaning, attention to the speaker's audience impacts what message is conveyed. According to Bakhtin, every thought a character has is not simply focused on its topic, but "is accompanied by a continual sideways glance at another person."[32] That other person, real or imagined, affects how the thought is communicated. In v. 31, the plural inflection of the first imperative, *tenu,* confirms the addressees as some plural entity. This plurality shifts the likely identity of addressee from being the *esheth chayil*'s husband alone (a singular object), toward all husbands, perhaps, or all community members, both male and female. If we allow "in the gates" to locate the action, then these addressees would be those who occupy the city gates, either literally or as symbol of the entire community.[33] These occupiers of the city

[32] Bakhtin, "Problems," 32.
[33] Yoder, 297; Waltke, 536.

gates could exist at the level of the story world, those who brush up against the *eshet chayil* and her husband in that space. Many of these have already appeared in the poem: those who know her husband (23), and the elders of the town (23), merchants (24) and possessors of land (16). They could also exist at the level of students or others inferred as listening to public performance of this poem.

Through the use of direct, second-person address ("[you all] give"), the narrator focuses attention upon these audiences, turning them into characters themselves, participants in what is going on. Blending of narrative levels produces an utterance in which possibly the narrator, and/or possibly the husband, or some other community representative(s), demands action of possibly members of the *eshet chayil*'s community, and/or, at another level, the speaker's gathered audience and, telescoping even further out in narrative levels, to the readers or hearers of the text. While acknowledging such multiplicity may be messy, it more accurately reflects how knowledge emerges, not through finite pronouncements but through dialogue with others and one's inner thoughts.[34]

Having noted a few features of v. 31 contributing to polyphony, let us now explore what messages might be communicated as various possible speakers express these lines.

Exhortation to Praise

As words of praise for an ideal woman, v. 31 indeed caps off a recitation of strength, competency, and achievement that could be spoken by any of the characters identified earlier: Lemuel, his mother, a scribal teacher, or the husband himself.

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[34] Bakhtin, "Dostoyevsky's Dialogue," 128.

Consistent with the focus of previous verses, v. 31 mentions "the fruit of her hands" and "her works." Also similar to earlier lines, it exalts the *eshet chayil* through imaging her as divine, replacing Yahweh or another deity as the object of praise. Many commentators ignore the grammatical construction of line (b) that assigns "her works" as the subject praising the *eshet chayil*. Instead they recast the line as one in which an individual or group praises the *eshet chayil*'s works[35] or praises the *eshet chayil* for her works.[36] Such interpretation requires significant emendation and may be motivated primarily by the expectation that within a hymn of praise, that is what *should* be happening.

In contrast, Albert Wolters is one scholar who does recognize the "works" as doing the praising. He deduces that these must be the woven belts and other textiles the *eshet chayil* produces.[37] These objects praising her contribute to her divine imaging in resembling psalms in which the works of creation praise Yahweh.[38] In fact, the word for "works" in v. 31, *ma'aseh,* most often elsewhere in biblical texts refers to Yahweh's creation, as in Psalm 111: "Great are the works of the Lord, sought by all who delight in them" (2). For Christine Yoder, the husband's "rank" is one of the works the poem celebrates, since his positioning in the city gates in v. 23 occurs within a catalogue of the *eshet chayil*'s accomplishments.[39] According to this interpretation, then, the assertion that "her works" will (or should) praise her constitutes a call for the husband to praise his "creator," his wife, the one who has made him what he is.

Promoting Males

[35] McKane, 670; Longman, 548.
[36] Hartley, 334; Yoder, 297; Waltke, 536.
[37] Wolters, 450.
[38] e.g. Psalm 148.
[39] Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2001), 89. Similarly, Waltke, 529.

It is curious, however, that verses so closely resembling psalms of praise to Yahweh nonetheless refrain from the conventional ending of such psalms. As deployed over a dozen times, these psalms end with the exclamation: "Halleluyah!"[40] Thrice in the final verses of Proverbs 31 the verb, *halal*, meaning, "to praise," appears, variously inflected.[41] This appearance Waltke labels, "jarring," because *halal* usually pertains to Yahweh.[42] But since it is there already, why not complete the pattern and finish this poem with a predictable, "Hallelu-hah!" In such case, "her" would become the final emphasized subject, giving glory to the *eshet chayil* as the psalms typically glorify Yahweh. The lack of such an obviously available option supplies further evidence that praising this woman is not this poem's entire purpose. Instead, the poem ends with mention of "her works," even placing this subject at some distance from its verb to locate it in position of prominence. The emphasis achieved through such a construction of the final line reminds the male audience of what is in it for them in their treatment and regard for this woman and, by extension, *their* women: wealth, security, prestige, and all of her many works. Ending the poem in this way and not the other reveals it to be, after all, not about the *eshet chayil* but about broader communal needs and desires.

We earlier noted male focalization in the way that previous verses celebrate the *eshet chayil*'s industry in terms of the pleasures and opportunities it provides to her husband. Such is happening here, too, though expanded to include the entire community. If we adopt the cause and effect parallelism proposed above, then the idea promoted in v. 31 is that (line a) *if* the woman is properly rewarded, (line b) *then* the community,

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[40] As in Psalms 104, 105, 106, 113,115,116, 117, 135, 146, 147, 148,149,150.
[41] vv. 29,30,31.
[42] Waltke, 535.

husbands in particular, will get to enjoy even more of "the fruit of her hands" when she reinvests them, as v. 16 describes her as doing.

Verse 31 reinforces male priority in other ways as well. That those addressed are likely male emerges through the substance of what is asked (or demanded) of them: giving "to her of [or from] the fruit of her hands." The persons addressed presumably control these "fruits" to the extent of being able to direct how they should be disposed. "The fruit of her hands" is likely a metaphor for the profits of her labors,[43] already mentioned in v. 16. If not the *eshet chayil* herself, husbands would be the ones to control their wives' financial assets.[44] So it is men, not women, who are looked to for the dispersal of funds. Significantly, this audience is not directed to give over *all* their financial assets, not even all that the *eshet chayil* produces. They are only asked to give *miperee* ("*from/of* the fruit"). As Ellen Davis and others translate, "Give her *a share*[45] in the fruit of her hands…"[46] Fox likens the *eshet chayil* in Proverbs 31 to an employee in her husband's firm, with all profits going to him. For Fox, then, v. 31 envisions the husband disbursing a bonus based upon exemplary performance.[47] Clearly, while the speaker directs husbands to give some measure of honor and material resources to their wives, he also expects them to retain the main part for themselves. Such action and the assumptions that lie behind it preserve the husband and male audience in position of power.

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[43] McKane, 668.

[44] Madipoane Masenya, *How Worthy is the Woman of Worth?: Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in African-South Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004),111.

[45] Emphasis mine.

[46] Ellen Davis, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville, Ky. : Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 151. Also Wilda C. M. Gafney, "Who Can Find a Militant Feminist? A Marginal(ized) Reading of Proverbs 31:1-31," *The AME Zion Quarterly Review* 112.2 (2000), 26.

[47] Fox, 914.

We earlier speculated that v. 31 might wrap up the husband's riposte. In such case it forms a public posturing that elevates him over others in being the one to speak, to articulate what is praise worthy, establishing who should act, and how, and who should receive said actions. In this the husband of v. 31 enacts what was earlier implied in v. 23: his judging function as an elder of the town. A cyclical accumulation of honor results as the husband's ostensible praise of his wife rebounds to enhance his own honor.

In line (b), depicting "her works" as doing the praising, rather than the very men who rely upon her industry, forms a rather obvious displacement, or perhaps a metonymy, sparing males the loss of honor that would come from their praising one who, according to cultural conceptions of gender and honor, ought to occupy a lower position in the communal honor-shame spectrum. Interestingly, the Septuagint rendering of v. 31 goes even further to guard male dominance. It renders the line, "and in the gates may *her husband* be praised."[48] This version eliminates entirely praise of the wife.

Advocating for Change

Still a third meaning for v. 31, joining female praise and male promotion, is advocating change. In actuality, any command does this, as a condition or action desired would not need to be spoken if already taking place. The setting of city gates, twice mentioned in this poem at key locations of emphasis, is a particularly suitable venue for expressing such desires, as Lady Wisdom, who protests folly, is located there (Proverbs 1-9). Such a setting suits well for conceiving v. 31 as shaming speech. According to Victor Matthews, a group oriented, honor-conscious society such as post-exilic Yehud

[48] *Septuaginta: With Morphology* (electronic ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979), Prov. 31:31. Translation mine.

expected every member of a household to uphold the honor of that household.[49] Should any lapse occur, all household members must exert pressure to prevent recurrence.[50] We already know based on v. 27 about household monitoring for shameful behaviors such as laziness. Shaming speech eliciting public embarrassment served as principal method for defending honor,[51] one in which women commonly engaged.[52] Frequently, such speech would resemble a "wisdom argument" calling upon "traditional practice, social codes, and covenantal allegiance."[53] The public setting would fuel the effectiveness of the rebuke in drawing support and reinforcement from its audience.[54] Also writing about shame in ancient societies, Lyn Bechtel identifies three main functions of public shaming: discouraging undesirable behavior, preserving through negative pressure social cohesion, and manipulating social status through dominating others.[55] We have already seen such functions enacted in King Lemuel's mother's rebuke. Verse 31 could be building off of previous commendations of the *eshet chayil*'s accomplishments to imply to its male, possibly younger, audience, "Now what do *you* contribute?" For this society, not being a team player is dishonorable.[56] In such light, v. 31, with its "Give to her…" means, "You also ought to do what *you* can: free her up to do her thing." The instruction in v. 31 can be understood as a shaming to promote social cohesion via all members fully engaging in domesticity and productivity.

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[49] Victor H. Matthews, "Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Legal Situations in the Hebrew Bible," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East,* ed. Victor Matthews et al. (Sheffield, Eng: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 98.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 99.

[52] Victor H. Matthews, "Female Voices: Upholding the Honor of the Household" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24, no. 1 (February 1994), 11.

[53] Matthews, "Honor and Shame," 99.

[54] Ibid., 100.

[55] Lyn M. Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction of Social Control in Biblical Israel: Judicial, Political, and Social Shaming," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 49 (1991), 53.

[56] Sneed, 264.

In addition to their public nature, a second reason the city gates suit as a setting for advocating change is their liminality. Walls separate, establishing boundaries, and gates are a part of that separating system. But gates also mark a threshold, allowing passage through that boundary. In a literal, geographical sense, then, gates are a space of liminality because when moving through them one's identity shifts in relation to the gates themselves, moving from insider to outsider, and vice versa. At some midway point, a traveler is neither fully insider nor outsider but a liminal blend.

Symbolically, too, the gates evoke liminality. Victor Turner describes liminality as playing a role in rites of passage.[57] In detachment, a subject relinquishes their former status and identity. They are then evaluated when in liminal state, leading to reincorporation into the community with a new identity, usually involving an elevation of status, as occurs, for example, when a prince becomes king.[58] This type of evaluation of community members as to their status within the community regularly occurred in ancient city gates, as several biblical texts reflect.[59] For example, Absalom's appearance at the gate displaced his father, David, elevating Absalom as ruling authority among the people and reducing his father's status (2 Sam. 15). Carey Walsh writes, "Liminality is the condition of uncertainty involved in a status transition. It is a threshold moment of the vulnerable, suspended state between a past status and one not yet secured. The gate, then, marks a psychic threshold of sorts, the in-between state inherent in status change."[60]

Walsh notes communal assessments of female identity taking place in city gates.[61]

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[57] Leo Perdue, "Liminality as a social setting for wisdom instructions," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93, no. 1 (1981), 116.

[58] Ibid., 120.

[59] See Carey Walsh, "Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City Gates in Biblical Memory," in *Memory and the City*, eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014).

[60] Walsh, 50.

[61] Ibid., 54.

Rahab's residence in the city wall reflects her liminal status as a citizen yet a prostitute (Josh. 2). In Ruth, the "gate" serves as metonymy for the community when Boaz says to Ruth, "All the gate of my people know that you are an *eshet chayil*" (3.11). Later, her assimilation into Boaz's family takes place in the city gates and is declared by "the elders and all the people at the gate" when they say, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel" (4.11). One's judgment in the gate and by the "gate" is what determines who a person is. Regarding v. 31, the liminality of city gates joins readerly assumptions of who speaks, to whom, and what is said to suggest that this female subject, the *eshet chayil*, is being similarly assessed as to her identity and status within the community.

Legal proceedings involve liminality. In the moments between when a defendant stands accused of offense and when he or she is judged as guilty or innocent, identity is uncertain. The accused is detached from their former standing. The coming judgment will render them either belonging to the community, valued, or an underminer of that community, to be punished somehow, perhaps assessed a fine, ejected from the city or even killed.

Legal Proceeding

All this leads me to propose v. 31 as snippet of a legal proceeding. In city gates all sorts of legal actions occurred: transfers of land or other property, marriages, divorces, punishment of law breakers, appeals for retributive justice due to injury, judgments thereof, and so on.[62] We have already mentioned how the verb, *nathan,* suits within the context of judicial rhetoric, and that Solomon in 1 Kings 3 utilizes it in this fashion.

[62] See Douglas A. Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

Distinct from the specific content of a speaker's expressed will, the choice to make a direct address via mention of the city gates also conjures a scene of public dispute resolution, akin to the instruction in Deuteronomy for parents to bring a rebellious son to the gates to be judged by the elders (21) or for a woman to seek satisfaction over a brother-in-law refusing to fulfill his duty of levirate marriage (25). Let us consider then how v. 31 might work if expressed within a scene of adjudication.

In *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel*, Douglas Knight describes legal practices of ancient Israel, noting that the laws that operated in history are not the same as laws recorded in biblical texts. The latter were not always actually practiced but served ideological purposes such as regulating power relations, legitimizing cultic activity, etc.[63] For most of Israel's history, oral tradition sufficed as legal code;[64] written codes such as those in biblical texts emerged only in the Persian era as a result of Persian policy that sought them.[65] The Persian Empire granted significant autonomy to its districts, allowing local governments to establish and enforce laws as long as these local governments maintained order, loyalty to the empire, and payment of taxes and tribute.[66]

Issues of concern could vary greatly between villages and cities. Whereas village life mostly involved agricultural pursuits, cities possessed greater diversity of occupation and activity, thus legal issues there could be more complex, often concerning property ownership and commercial transactions.[67] Urban dwellers possessed considerably more wealth and power than rural residents, who frequently served the city elites.[68] This

[63] Knight, 11.
[64] Ibid., 27.
[65] Ibid., 78.
[66] Ibid., 27.
[67] Ibid., 176.
[68] Ibid., 222.

disparity formed a significant source of distress. City dwellers depended on villagers, and they possessed the means to make villagers behave in ways that served the interests of city's elite.[69] One such means included occupying positions of leadership that allowed them to set, interpret, and decide legal matters.[70]

Proverbs 31, with its mention of gates, wealthy residents, and flourishing commerce, evokes an urban, not a rural, atmosphere. We could imagine the speaker of v. 31 as the type of advocate longed for in the book of Job, someone to testify in defense of another, pleading their case before a judge (Job 16.19-21). Or the speaker could be a Boaz figure from the book of Ruth, one who negotiates on behalf of widows or others perceived to be in need. While characters in these stories — Job, Naomi, and Ruth — face desperate circumstances, they also correlate with the elite members of Yehud due to being either wealthy and leisured (Job) or land-owners (Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz). The *eshet chayil* shares membership in this privileged class.

With such readerly attention in mind, then, what would the v. 31 speaker be advocating or negotiating for? "Give to her from the fruit of her hands, and they will praise her in the gates, her works." These lines can be understood to advocate giving to the *eshet chayil* (and by extension other women) greater control of household assets (which she herself has, after all, so effectively produced), with the incentive for doing so being the promise of increased financial returns that women's wise investment will incur.

Land possession floats in the ether of this verse because of "the fruit of her hands," a phrase previously mentioned in v. 16 in relation to acquiring land and planting a vineyard. Land played a big part of the social change affecting all segments of society

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[69] Ibid., 223.
[70] Ibid.

in the Persian era. During this time residents of cities acquired large landholdings formerly occupied by villagers,[71] who now were needed to farm this land for luxury goods desired by empire, not for their own subsistence needs. According to Roland Boer, resolving the "determinative contradiction" between the desires of palatine estates and the subsistence survival needs of village communes is a primary focus of many biblical texts.[72] Such an interest seems present here.

This interpretation shows v. 31 as displaying a stark disregard for villagers, the people dispossessed of their land. As explained in chapter three of this project, they are erased even from their capacity as the literal "hands" who would plant the *eshet chayil*'s vineyard, all credit for that being given instead to the metaphorical "fruit of her hands" (16). What v. 31 also implies is that the best way for the elites to maintain and increase their access to land is through the type of aggressive wealth management pursued by the *eshet chayil*. Perhaps the culmination in v. 31 of the acrostic cements a depiction of oppression that explains why peasants or their sympathizers would fantasize in vv. 5-9 for a king/the mother of a king to rise up and lobby for them.

Both Oppressor and Oppressed

We have established that as a member of the elite class, the *eshet chayil* is fully implicated in the exploitation of peasants in generating the resources that the elite and the larger empire needed to survive. On the other hand, as an elite *female*, the *eshet chayil* is both oppressor and oppressed. She is the "other" to text-producing males. In the Persian Era, women's status varied from community to community. In Elephantine, they seem to

[71] Ibid., 202.

[72] Roland Boer, "The Economic Politics of Biblical Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative,* ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 537.

have enjoyed some legal parity with men,[73] but Athens restricted their rights.[74] So as a female, and in light of the male priority identified above, the *eshet chayil* can also in this verse represent the exploited. The line already conveys a sense that the *eshet chayil* is not receiving what someone considers her due; she is therefore also a victim of injustice.

Zeba Crook lists three examples of Hellenistic women successfully arguing legal defenses before magistrates in public.[75] Others through male representatives brought charges against males for criminal or civil offenses.[76] These incidents enable us to imagine v. 31 as a woman's appeal or one brought on behalf of women for greater honor and power. Those appealed to could be the elders at the gate referenced in v. 23, who decide such matters. As such this appeal constitutes an alternative voice to that of biblical law codes and narratives that subordinate wives to their husbands. Of such passages, Esther Fuchs writes, "They prescribe the wife's dependence on her husband, depriving her of economic independence and turning her into his economic asset and exclusive sexual property."[77]

We noted earlier the ambiguous positioning of the *eshet chayil* within the city gates in earlier lines of the poem, even though her undertakings as described indicate that she is there,[78] as well as in fields, foreign lands and, yes, at home. In v. 31, also, the wording leaves ambiguous who or what is being located in the city gates: the works praising her or the woman herself (or both). That lack of location — no mere oversight

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[73] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "The Lives of Women in Postexilic Era," in *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, eds. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Calduch-Benages (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 21.

[74] Ibid., 19.

[75] Zeba Crook, "Honor, shame, and social status revisited," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009), 606.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman.* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 116.

[78] Masenya, 105.

but a textual choice — generates a liminality that allows maneuvering toward a new and desired location. "… [P]raise her in the city gates," can be read as lobbying to locate the *eshet chayil* in a definitive manner that previous lines did not do. Thus for clarification we may fill in an existing ellipsis so that the final line reads: "may they/they will praise her *(who is)* in the city gates …" This definitive locating of the *eshet chayil* resembles space theorist Tim Cresswell's description of "transgressive acts": unsanctioned, nontraditional actions within a given space committed by marginalized groups in violation of the norms of behavior expected to occur in that space.[79] Such "deviance"[80] brings into focus just what the norms of society actually are by revealing that these have been violated by the transgressive act. This latest option then answers the question posed in v. 10: "An *eshet chayil*, who can find?" If she turns out to be located in the city gates, then those wishing to find her must meet her there.

Seen as transgressive act, v. 31's mention of city gates contrasts with the depiction of city gates in v. 23. Verse 23 presented, in Henri Lefebvre's terminology, a conceived mental representation of how those in charge of organizing society would like that space to be used. In contrast, v. 31 calls for a better alignment between the poem's earlier representation of space and its *lived* space, an acknowledgment of what is communally perceived as real needing to be set alongside the conceived ideal. Such exertion on behalf of those actually doing the labor within a space Lefebvre identified as essential toward changing the world for the better.[81] Such exertion explodes "imposed space" and frees up

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[79] Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 9-11.

[80] Ibid., 24.

[81] Henri Lefebvre, "Space: Social Product and Use Value," in *State, Space, World: selected essays*, eds. Neil Brenner, and Stuart Elden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 193.

a "collective and practical [space], controlled by the base, that is, democratic."[82]

Verse 31's transgressive act challenges communal ideology as well as practice. As discussed earlier, actions in space and relationships of persons interacting in space construct both spaces and the identities of those occupying them. Cresswell's explanation of the correlation between space and ideology can be helpful here. In any community, habits of behavior in space come to be seen as normal or natural. Thus "unstated and taken for granted"[83] expectations for behavior support the existing power structure. The elders sitting in the gates (23) serve as an example of habitual behavior that supports a power structure because elders located in that spot are the ones who act to make decisions concerning communal issues. The marginalized — women or peasants — do not. Verse 31 advocates for the *eshet chayil* not just a better physical location, but a better social position as well. She deserves honor, wealth, and power. "Give to her of the fruit of her hands" can imply: Not just your *words* of praise: give also of the material substance that she herself produced. "Let her works praise her" can be read to emphasize *her* (rather than *him*), as in: let her works praise *her*, instead of her husband, who usually accrues the praise (as per v. 23). According to Joel Biwul, "To praise one's wife … in public in such a society would mean to initiate a shift in paradigm from what is normative."[84]

Such an appeal for relocating and reincorporating the *eshet chayil* with an elevation of her acquired honor produces a new understanding of the meaning and purpose of the earlier mention of "*Chen* is false and beauty a vapor" (30). As argued in chapter four, these are the resources traditionally recognized as those women rely upon to

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[82] Ibid.
[83] Cresswell, 3.
[84] Joel Biwul, "What is He Doing at the Gate," *OTE* 29/1 (2016), 55.

gain what they need — and, at least in part, lacking other options, they are the ones they actually do rely upon. But v. 31 can be understood to argue that if the *eshet chayil* could have *economic freedom*, she would not need to rely on *chen* and beauty to provide for her family and keep the community safe, as did Rahab, Delilah, and Esther. Reinvesting "the fruit of her hands" is the true source of prosperity, rendering *chen* and beauty, indeed, illusions and vapors.

Judgment Rendered

We have entertained the notion of v. 31 as legal appeal. Another way of looking at it within the context of a legal proceeding is as judgment rendered following appeal, either an implicit appeal resulting from the preceding praise of the *eshet chayil*, or an explicit one if we take vv. 10-30 itself to be an extended appeal on her behalf. In such case the elders of the city gates, or the entire community, sometimes invoked to add legitimacy (Ruth 4), speak the words of v. 31.

According to Knight, oral law developed through decisions about specific situations which served as precedent or principle for future similar incidents.[85] We can view Prov. 31.31 as depicting an instance of emerging oral law. Premodern legal systems assessed guilt collectively much more readily than law courts today.[86] For tort cases, they focused on remedies that strengthened the community, such as restitution, rather than mere punishment.[87] We see these priorities in v. 31 if understood as judgment. The instruction to give is directed to a plural audience. It seeks a material allotment to the *eshet chayil* following an argument of what she contributes and deserves. One can

[85] Knight, 35.
[86] Ibid., 48.
[87] Ibid., 34.

imagine such a judgment over time constituting an effective principle to apply with regard to wives and other laborers. *Let them have a share of their profits, for this will only benefit us all.* Such policy would maintain order, keeping everyone satisfied enough in their respective roles not to rebel. "Laws are products of power," writes Knight. "They stemmed from those who sought to control their worlds."[88]

An Open Ending

We have identified numerous ways of understanding v. 31 as contributing to a narrative-like portrayal of Persian-era Yehudite needs and desires: elevating females, reinforcing males, shaming, transgressing — whether a legal appeal or a judgment. Readers, tantalizingly, do not know how those instructed to "give" in v. 31 will respond. Does the community give what is called for? Does it grant more honor and power to women?

This poem gifts readers an open ending, like that of the book of Jonah, which ends with a question: "Should I not have pity on Nineveh, that great city?"[89] Like Proverbs 31, Jonah's ending also concerns identity: who belongs and how should the other be treated. In Proverbs 31, as in the case of Jonah, the lack of an answer facilitates multiple options for response. Bakhtin would have it this way, not expecting nor desiring closure in a polyphonic work.[90] He valued depictions of characters on the threshold, with internally unfinalized heroes.[91] Proverbs 31 evokes this type of threshold moment in conveying clashes between genders and classes culminating in a call to action but no

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[88] Ibid., 84.

[89] For discussion of Jonah's open-ending, see David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*: 129-146. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993.

[90] Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *The Journal of Religion* 76.2 (1996), 294.

[91] Mikhail Bakhtin, excerpt from "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 96.

response. Verse 31 asserts not the final word, allowing instead for ongoing responses to reverberate in readers' minds. These needn't resolve into one meaning but may remain in dialogue — or quarrel — with each other. Such an unfinalized ending comes full circle back to the chapter's beginning, which introduced its oracle as a quarrel and an ambiguity of voicings. Verse 31 displays in compact form the entire chapter's function as site of ongoing contestation, with social, political, and economic interests asserting themselves to define and debate the best activities and identities for a certain people in a certain space.

CHAPTER SIX

"WISDOM" CRIES ALOUD

"Do not give to women …" (2) / "Give to her … !" (31)
"A woman of *chayil*, who can find?" (10) / "Many daughters do *chayil* …" (29)

This examination of Proverbs 31 has attempted to break through traditions of interpretation and the constrictions of presumed genre to produce an interpretation that attends to this chapter's narrative elements, how they make meanings and impact communities. Characterization, focalization, tension, setting, and suspense: with such elements readers form logical and emotional connections within the text, between it and other texts, and between this text and their own experiences. The interpretations produced via such socio-narratological focus embody communal contestations, with diverse sectors of society struggling for power and advantage. Such a reading strategy models a means of engaging texts that attends to the multiple voices within them. The claims, the counter-claims, the questioning of the claims, and other responses, too, form an essential part of a text's dialogic message. This in turn can impact identity construction that occurs within communities impacted by Proverbs 31. It does so by normalizing talk-back to a text's dominant messaging, whether that be of class, gender, ethnicity, or other interest groups. This concluding chapter reviews the significant features of this approach, what details such analysis has unearthed, and offers a few thoughts concerning the value of this interpretive method for contemporary readers in forming empowered identities and developing ethical social structures.

For theorists, this method leans especially on Mikhail Bakhtin, who writes admiringly of Fyodor Dostoyevsky: "In every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a crack, and a tendency to go over immediately to another contradictory expression; in every gesture he detected confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously; he perceived the profound ambiguity, even multiple ambiguity of every phenomenon."[1] Many features of Proverbs 31 match those identified by Bakhtin as contributing to polyphony: the sideways glance, interruption, juxtaposition of quotations, change in address, loopholes, double-voicedness, questions, carnivalesque and intertextuality. Readers habitually smooth over the gaps, ambiguities and contradictions of a text when forming in their own minds a "story" of it. This project tries instead to notice these as utterances packed with meanings. The quotation snippets introducing this chapter illustrate the multiplicities present in Proverbs 31.

Because of the mention of numerous spaces in Proverbs 31 and the importance of space in identity construction, I also draw upon space theorists Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and Tim Cresswell to understand the function of the spaces mentioned in Proverbs 31. Mieke Bal has observed that narrative spaces can possess semantic significance on par with that of characters.[2] Suspecting this to be the case of Proverbs 31's city gates, I inquire as to what problems and solutions might be conveyed via their mention. Given space as socially produced and socially productive,[3] how does the presence or absence of various characters in particular spaces impact the identity

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[1] Mikhail Bakhtin, excerpt from "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 91-92.

[2] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: U of Toronto, 2009), 138.

[3] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 129.

construction of characters and spaces? How do the ways that characters move in the spaces of the poem affect the same? How are community members hearing the text affected by expectations that form via the text's constructions of the proper and improper uses of space?

Mention of city gates also invites consideration of the oral performance of Proverbs 31. A public gathering spot, gates host many types of public performances: religious and communal rituals, legal proceedings, scribal instruction. The two poems of Proverbs 31 fit recitation within these contexts. As an example of the blurring of narrative levels in Proverbs 31, the scenes depicted within these poems can also be understood as performances within the city gates, for example, a shaming speech (1-9) or legal procedure (10-31). Considering oral performance brings to the fore details of the text not commonly recognized: possible intonations, bodily gestures, humor, and audience participation. These I weigh for their possible contributions to the meaning of these poems.

Women's social conditions, the political organization of society, and economic activities form rich subjects to consider when it comes to understanding what conversations Proverbs 31 contributes to and how. A satellite of empire, Persian-era Yehud experienced significant upheaval as colonial authorities sought to maintain order and extract taxes and tribute via the cooperation of a privileged local class.[4] Such is the backdrop I link to Proverbs 31, seeking to understand how this text responds to these conditions.

Insights Unearthed

[4] Douglas A. Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 27.

Among the most interesting insights this approach has unearthed are various ways of conceiving the two poems as *event*. While vv. 1-9 fit the genre of wisdom instruction, signals of conflict also enable it to be conceived narratively as an act of quarrel, dialogically articulating both a mother's complaint in the heat of the moment and a son's memory of this interaction and response to it. These signals of conflict include suggestive terms (such as *massa, "*burden*," yesar, "*rebuke," and *betan*, "womb"), a stuttering of words, emotive expression, strategic silence, and the messaging of the mother's words themselves, indicating dissatisfaction and complaint.

Verses 10-31 also can be conceived not merely as encomium but as an event, possibly a challenge to a husband's honor with answering riposte. As challenge and riposte, the extreme attribution of honor to the *eshet chayil,* including masculine characteristics, elevates her above her "*ba'al*," implicitly challenging his claim to honor and provoking defensive response. This occurs in vv. 29-31, where the husband in speaking confirms control not only, as husband, over his wife but also, as male elder, over other males with regard to social organization and practice.

Verses 10-31 also suggest a legal proceeding, either an appeal for justice or decision concerning the same. As an appeal, vv. 10-30 form the basis of the argument, pointing out the *eshet chayil*'s value to her husband, family, and the community at large. She produces textiles and sells them for profit, efficiently manages household and farm, speaks with wisdom, and channels all her actions according to *chesed*, a commitment to community. Yet these verses also convey tensions between the husband and wife that need addressing: no communication between the pair, only indirect claims as to the wife's sunny outlook, the wife's masculinity potentially displacing her husband, competition

between the *eshet chayil* and other wives (29), and a rejection or critique of traditionally recognized feminine qualities (30). Considered as appeal for justice, this extensive argumentative foundation then culminates in the appeal itself of v. 31 to give the *eshet chayil* material and public recognition that she does deserve.

Alternatively, as a judgment, not an appeal, v. 31 responds to an implied appeal emerging from the preceding complimentary overview of the *eshet chayil* in vv. 10-30. Shifting presumed speaker from advocate to judge, v. 31 does not *ask* for re-allotment of resources and recognition to the *eshet chayil* but *decrees* that city elders enact this vision. Either scenario envisions the city gates as setting for this legal procedure.

We can also conceive the two poems together as an event of dialogue. Common vocabulary and themes of women, wealth, oppression, speaking, and family relationships encourage conflation. In such case vv. 1-9 form an introductory complaint concerning the fragility of the status quo, obligations to community, and the unequal access to resources needed to survive. Verses 10-30, with no established speaker, elaborate on this in any number of ways. The mother may be illustrating predatory conditions provoking her concern for the "poor and needy," or she may be steering the son in ideology and practices that will secure his prominence. The son in vv. 10-30 could be deflecting attention away from himself and onto another who bears responsibility for productivity and provision: women, backbone of the community. Verse 31 then culminates the vv. 10-30 variation on vv. 1-9 with its "give to her" contrasting with v. 3's "do not give." The multiple options and lack of resolution form in readers the impression of an ongoing conversation on topics of critical importance to communal stability and flourishing. This is the event of Proverbs 31, illustrated in miniature in v. 31, the community at large and

individuals within it experiencing a "threshold" moment of identities defined according to emerging understandings of optimal values and behavior.

In addition to recognizing the poems as various types of event, conceiving Proverbs 31 narratively also permits readers a deeper characterization of the several figures mentioned, with attendant identities. The king's mother, as typical of biblical mothers, cares about her son, promotes him, advises him. In urging her son to judge rightly, she perpetuates elite rule even as her multiple references to the oppressed and mention of libations suggest a keen assessment of how economic conditions and political structures contribute to the deprivation of a sizable segment of the population. This mother is invested not only in her son but also in her community. In the way she promotes social policy, appealing to her son's best interests, she shows herself clever. Lemuel, a king, a leader, a named individual, if not actually foolish, is seemingly capable of rash behavior and of neglecting his duty. He remembers his mother and her words, though readers do not know how accurate his recall or whether the memory signals righteous conviction or recurring shame. Options for conceiving his response include silence or protest. The silence after v. 9 could signal either assent or rebellion. Verses 10-31, if protest, warn: what you want for me either in wife or lifestyle cannot be found. The words of vv. 1-9 as spoken by the mother and remembered by the son demonstrate a deep emotional bond, projecting onto each other their own anxieties and needs, while internalizing the identity-constructing influence of the other.

As for the characters in vv. 10-31: they are the wealthy, privileged, powerful elite. The husband, a family man, an elder, possesses high honor. He is known in the gates, a judge. Thanks to his wife, he has everything he could possibly need. His wife is "the

whole package," working night and day, accomplished in the sophisticated and lucrative craft of textile production, an efficient household manager, tradeswoman, well-versed in wisdom. Because the husband focalizes the *eshet chayil,* the text notes about her what matters to him, not her. We don't really know of her happiness or health; they do not matter within the world of this poem. In this respect, the *eshet chayil* actually more closely resembles the various "others" of the poem: the *aney v'avyon* (9, 20), the "girls" (15), the unacknowledged planters of fields (16), the *Kena'any* (24). The *eshet chayil* appears aloof, undermining the utopian depiction of this marriage and family.

A final instance of characterization deepened via socio-narratological examination relates to the implied speaker and audience due to the blurring between narrative levels in v. 1 and vv. 29-31. Telescoping further out, the blurring even invites readers or hearers of the poem also to enter its story and contribute to the conversation. Across both poems, emphasis on honor and shame, which are publicly enacted, and connections with legal traditions encourage viewing the speaker as a community elder. These themes, the mention of city gates, and the use of second-person plural inflections (6,31) encourage envisioning the audience also as elders or as the community at large. Intertextual echoes conjure Ruth 4, where both male and female community members weigh in on legal transactions that hold profound consequences for the social standing of individual members and the welfare of the community overall.

Character construction occurs in many ways: what characters say and do, how they are described, what associated character types they trigger, and how they interact with others. As Hilde Lindemann Nelson notes, identity is "a complicated interaction of

one's own sense of self and others' understanding of who one is… ."[5] This interpersonal aspect affects not only identity but also agency, as conceptions form expectations of behavior in space, resulting either in permission or obstruction with regard to certain actions.[6] In Proverbs 31, attending to the ways characters interact with others in space contributes to their identity construction while also revealing power dynamics that both result from and reinforce identities.

In Proverbs 31, depictions of behaviors in space confirm traditions associating males with public spaces and females with the private ones.[7] Verse 23 locates the husband in the gates, sitting with the elders of the city. The noun, "house" (*bet*), occurs three times (15, 21, 27), always with female singular inflection, so it is *her* house. These features and the actions of each character within these spaces ascribe to the husband and wife power and authority within respective spaces. The husband's honor and inclusion among the elders garners for him a large measure of control over the actions of others in public, that is, in communal practices and beliefs. The wife in her sphere also has great control. She is the decision maker concerning how the household will function as it generates and consumes resources required to survive and thrive. Her metaphorical description as both soldier and hunter show her to be a powerful force who can wrest what she wants from others (16, 20) or shoot down any threat (27), whether from outside or inside the home.

Yet sown among these indicators of gendered spaces are transgressions of the same. The husband is labeled, *ba'alah*, "her master" or "her owner." His wife's activities

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[5] Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001), xi.
[6] Ibid., 34.
[7] Of such traditions see Anne Katrine Gudme, "Inside-Outside: Domestic Living Space in Biblical Memory" in *Memory and the City in Ancient Israel,* eds. Diana Vikander Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2014) and Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

and accomplishments are focalized according to how they please him. The male figures of husband and sons, not daughters or sisters, deem her praiseworthy and speak the words that articulate who she is (29-30). In these subtle ways the husband still manages to assert authority and power over his wife and house.

As for the *eshet chayil*, her depiction indicates some power in public spaces, if not recognized authority. As producer and seller of textiles, she is an economic engine whose energy carries along others in addition to herself, determining what they do, who they interact with, where they live, and so on. While not specifically located in the city gates as is her husband, the mentions of "plunder," "prey," and "from afar" show that the *eshet chayil* does successfully spend time outside the home. Most significantly, as discussed in chapter five, v. 31's call to "… [p]raise her in the city gates," can be read as calling for a better alignment between the poem's earlier representation of space and its depiction of *lived* space, which indicates the *eshet chayil* does actually occupy the city gates, contributing there both economically and socially (26).

Thus far we have focused on the power dynamics of husband and wife in the acrostic, but they operate also between the mother and son of the preceding oracle, not through spaces but through speaking. Lemuel has advantages: named, credited most directly with the words that are spoken, the one expected to act. But the words are also attributed to his mother, and she delivers the evaluation of his actions. She is the one giving advice to him, thus positioning herself as authority. The emotionality of expression and appeals to their intimate relation (2) evidence the effort to influence another in a situation where direct power to command is not available.

Women, of course, commonly find themselves in such situations. Lacking power

or authority, they must for safety's sake strategically deploy the assets at their disposal for maximum impact. In biblical texts, these assets could include words of counsel, as Bathsheba or Job's wife display. They could include material resources, as Abigail or Naomi possess, or physical beauty and agreeable manners, as Esther or Delilah inhibit. Proverbs 31 acknowledges and addresses such strategic means of acting to gain what is needed in the comment, "*Chen* [charm/favor] is false, and beauty a vapor; a woman — Fear of Yahweh — she — *she* — will be praised" (30).

As discussed in chapter four, this line can be interpreted a number of ways. Most popular is to regard it as naming one quality commonly associated with women and rejecting that quality via negative assessment, or as perhaps implying, in partnership with v. 29, that while other women may receive acclaim for their charm and beauty, this one, the *eshet chayil*, receives praise instead for her "fear of Yahweh." But another way of conceiving v. 30 is as matter-of-factly listing, accepting, even affirming, yet another quality possessed by the *eshet chayil,* one that she exerts in typically superior fashion. *Chen* and beauty do oftentimes cloud men's judgment, that is, cause them to act without regard to their own best interests, which winds up benefitting a woman. So King Ahasuerus to Esther: "What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom" (Esther 5.3). When deployed on behalf of Israel, such strategic use of the proverbial "feminine wiles" garners celebration. So Sarah, Tamar, Jael, and others experience. Several lines suggest the *eshet chayil*'s clever strategies for getting what she needs (13, 14, 16, 20). The poem also notes her speaking with wisdom (26), and wisdom need not constitute pious opining on abstract philosophical or theological concepts. Its most general sense includes any ability, gift or skill that enables navigating the world in

such a way as to be successful.[8] Verse 30 may add to the *eshet chayil*'s characterization as clever by implying that, if need be, the *eshet chayil* can even deploy *chen* and *yafey* effectively. As multiple biblical narratives attest, sometimes these too participate in the approach to living being advocated here, the one labelled the "fear of Yahweh."

We don't have to pick just one meaning to the line, "Favor is false…" The multiple options no doubt accurately reflect confusion and ambivalence on the part of males toward females, illustrating perhaps why Lemuel's mother would warn against women, against Lemuel's giving them his *chayil* — strength, wealth, procreative potential, even. The multiple options for understanding v. 30 contribute to the text itself serving as a site of communal discussion concerning this issue of women's roles and positioning. What do we want of our women: pleasure, labor, intelligence? Are women, as "ours," fully to be trusted (11)? Or, as "other," are they dangerous (3)? To what extent ought we control them or free them? Such questions a community can process as they invoke and then interpret within multiple contexts the communal proverb being referenced in v. 30.

When it comes to power dynamics, Proverbs 31 displays not only those between males and females, but also between the elite and the peasant classes. The status of the elite is conveyed through their titles, wealth, opportunities, honor, slaves, and general flourishing, while that of the poor through several mentions that use varying vocabulary to construct a cumulative picture. They are the "sons of affliction/poverty/misery" (5, 9, 20), "perishing … bitter of soul" (6, 8), "in poverty … toiling" (7), "unable to speak" (8), "living in want" (9, 20). Through her critique, Lemuel's mother connects the power of the

[8] Mark Sneed, *The Social World of the Sages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 3.

ruling class with an obligation to seek justice on behalf of the poor. An elite, she uses legal terminology and references legal situations (5) to advocate that her son speak on behalf of the underclass. At the same time, she smooths the way for elites to control and even take advantage of the peasant class via the legal system. As Douglas Knight observes, resolving conflict is only one purpose of law; another is to advance the interests of one party over another.[9] Whoever has power over the legal system has the power to shape the ordering of society in ways not available to those who are not part of that power structure. Lemuel's mother is conditioning her son into this dominant role. She also takes for granted another power available to the elite that peasants do not have, which is speaking, and she uses it herself to coach her successor in this power. In contrast, the poor do not speak and are presumed unable to do so (8).

Verses 1-9's urging the involvement of an authority figure in justice-seeking invites extending that focus into vv. 10-31. The *eshet chayil*, like Lemuel's mother, is a member of the elite. Frequent mention of "hands" serves as just one indicator of her power. The acrostic depicts and urges urban, not rural, flourishing, for example, in mentioning "gates." Cities contain the consolidated wealth of the elite.[10] In the Persian era, city dwellers depended on villagers to work their estates, and they had the power and resources to coerce them into compliance.[11] Proverbs 31 suggests as much in the *eshet chayil*'s taking of land (16) and her forceful interactions with the poor and needy with relation to her textile production (19-20). She gets what she wants, accomplishments focalized in such a way as to celebrate her with nary a thought for those she has

[9] Knight, 36.
[10] Ibid., 222.
[11] Ibid., 223.

displaced, those planting fields (16), tending sheep and reaping flax (13). All these are resources cultivated for use in producing her luxury goods. To the extent that we understand v. 31 as advocating for the interests of the *eshet chayil*, an elite landowner, such advocacy promotes the interests of the "haves" over the "have-nots."

On the other hand if, thinking dialogically, we attend to additional voices present in the text, then we can hear, too, the peasant experience in Lemuel's mother's repeated attempts to describe them. Even as she fails, the mother's urging to speak on their behalf calls attention to their plight, and her preference that beer and wine be served to them instead of at royal banquets protests rulers' callous behaviors and suggests a need for radical social change. In the acrostic, vv. 19-20 can be understood as not only celebrating the *eshet chayil*'s accomplishments but also depicting the plight of the poor. If we accept the argument laid out in chapter three concerning chiastic linking of textiles, the poor, and the *eshet chayil*'s forcefulness, then this bald admission of the *eshet chayil*'s exploitation of the poor must imply protest against her. To the extent that the *eshet chayil*, as argued above, is an "other" to the male audience, she can represent the underclass even as she is also an elite. In such case, the call of v. 31 to give "her" more resources and honor becomes a push back against the elite class on behalf of its hard laborers.

In sum, a dialogic focus on narrative elements within Proverbs 31 enables various ways of conceiving it as dramatic event, with characterizations that highlight imbalances of power between males and females and elites and peasants. These power dynamics are not fixed, however. Polyphony enables viewing all these social groups asserting and resisting control. The poem is itself a site of contestation in which spaces and speaking shape ever-malleable identities.

To What Is This A Reply?

Having looked back over our tilled ground, we ought now to consider toward what yield such soil could be devoted. Socio-narratology asks what work is being done in communities through narratives. Many possibilities we have identified in pockets; here we view the landscape as a whole.

Proverbs 31 commences with mention of "a king" (1), a representative of social order. When read with socio-narratological focus, the chapter depicts the struggle to establish an optimal orderly existence. As Knight asserts, every society actively works through a variety of rewards and punishments to condition members into norms of behavior and belief.[12] Proverbs 31 contributes to this effort through its shamings and praisings. Lemuel's mother shames her son for intemperate behavior and urges sober (literally) exercise of justice. Verses 10-31 praise industry and communal devotion while shaming laziness. Focalization of a seeming utopia conditions husbands into their patriarchal role and wives to support their "masters" through devotion to their households. The poor depend upon the rich for justice and provision.

Social order necessitates the exercise of power to control others. Contrary to Michael Fox's slap-down of feminist scholarship on Proverbs 31 wherein he insists, "… nor is power at issue,"[13] power is in fact repeatedly asserted and reinforced in Proverbs 31. Lemuel's mother warns against a threat to her son's power. She urges him to deploy his power on behalf of the poor. The *eshet chayil*'s strength and activity are exercises of power, and the celebration of honor includes the elevation of one person or group over

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[12] Ibid., 31.

[13] Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 913.

others. More appropriate therefore is Jean-Daniel Macchi's observation concerning Hebrew Bible texts, "Since people live in societies, the question of the exercise of power arises."[14]

Now, to invoke the question Bal commends: "To what is this a reply?"[15] We know of ongoing tensions in Persian-era Yehud between the returning *golah* community and pre-existing occupants.[16] The *golah* leveraged their relationship with imperial authority to gain access to land.[17] They also, initially, intermarried with people of the land,[18] although some later repudiated exogamy, perhaps out of concern for apostasy, loss of ethnic identity, or loss of land if remarriage should occur outside the tribe.[19] The immigration of the *golah* imposed severe hardship on the native population, which was already weak and poor.[20] This hardship derived not only from loss of land but because the reigning elites required the native peasants to grow crops they could not use for their own sustenance but which were instead exported for consumption by imperial elites.[21] Tax burdens also increased.[22] Some peasants found themselves conscripted to work on public works projects or to serve as soldiers.[23] Tensions may also have existed among factions within

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[14] Jean-Daniel Macchi, "Denial, Deception, or Force: How to Deal with Powerful Others in the Book of Esther," in *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period,* eds. *Ehud* Ben Zvi, and Diana Vikander Edelman (London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 219.

[15] Bal, 228.

[16] Marbury 172.

[17] Herbert Marbury, "The Strange Woman in Persian Yehud: A Reading of Proverbs 7," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period,* ed. Jon Berquist (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008), 172.

[18] Gale A. Yee, "The Other Woman in Proverbs: My Man's not Home; He Took His Moneybag With Him," in *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 112.

[19] David Janzen, "Scholars, Witches, Ideologues and What the Text Said: Ezra 9-10 and Its Interpretation," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period,* ed. Jon Berquist (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008), 49.

[20] Yee, 138.

[21] Sneed, 48-49.

[22] Yee, 139.

[23] Johannes Un-Sok Ro, "Socio-Economic Context of Post-Exilic Community and Literacy."

the *golah.* According to Jon Berquist, priests and politicians shared and contested power.[24] These derived their respective authority and power from the cult and the courts,[25] and so could have been at odds when conditioning the ideology of the society.

With these circumstances in mind, we can understand Proverbs 31 to offer reply to the question of who is or ought to be in charge and how well they are doing. Verses 1-9 hold elites responsible for maintaining a social structure that addresses the suffering of the poor. In light of several Aramaisms and other hints of foreign influence, it may target Persian rulers in particular. The portrayal of Lemuel as a drinker, in effect robbing the poor of their harvest for his own pleasure, and at the cost of the poor receiving justice, asserts the limits and shortcomings of such foreign rule. On the other hand, Lemuel and his mother needn't reference foreign rulers in particular. The foreign loan words could mock the *golah* by implying their complicity *with* foreign rule, suggesting who they truly identify with, where they really come from or where their true loyalties lie: outside the land.

Verses 10-31 notably lack reference to foreign rule or temple influence. Christine Yoder claims in light of mention of the "fear of Yahweh" that the *eshet chayil* is a model of religious piety for men in the *golah* community.[26] If true, any such religious piety would have less to do with cultic devotion than the fervor with which one ought to fulfill societal roles and duties. That is what is really promoted in the text. Political, not priestly, *golah* scribes or bureaucrats create a world that preserves power through depicting their

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Zeitschrift fȍr die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 120.4 (2008), 600.

[24] Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Min- neapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 153.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Christine Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2001), 107.

own participation in trade-based wealth, leadership, and legal decision making. These scribes normalize women and other workers devoting themselves the cause of *chesed*. Notably, no markers distinguish marriage to the *eshet chayil* as endogamous or exogamous. This may signal that ethnic crossings, like gender and spatial transgressions, hold much potential for *chesed* and "fear of Yahweh" to best develop and deploy.

To cultivate "fear of Yahweh," the text in its conclusion replaces the male desire for women promoted at the beginning of the chapter (3,10) with desire for "fear of Yahweh" (30). As the former must be strong, passionate, and persistent, the message goes, so the latter. Both poems in Proverbs 31 channel male sexual desire toward one's wife and no other woman. In this the text echoes and reinforces themes in the book's introductory chapters. Whereas Proverbs 7 depicts the strange, forbidden, adulterous woman as inviting men to her luxuriously appointed bed (16), in Proverbs 31 the *eshet chayil* possesses the same — even the dyed Egyptian linen (22). So stick with her, instead! Like Proverbs 1-9, women in Proverbs 31 are both speaker and spoken about, trusted counselor, source of largesse, yet also danger to wealth and to honor. They symbolize home yet also form the "other" in opposition to whom males develop their own identity.

Extant records indicate in many Persian-era locations women fully participating in social and business activities; likely this was true also in Yehud.[27] Where women have freedom to move, produce, and invest, men may very well ask whether such freedom will benefit or harm them. The multiplicity of Proverbs 31 may express anxiety about the precariousness of social organization where men do not have the control they would wish

[27] Ibid., 12.

either in public or in their homes. Such resembles the story of Vashti in the book of Esther, who had to be taught a lesson so that wives would not get the idea they can act against the wishes of their husbands. Proverbs 31 expresses this anxiety through Lemuel's mother's warning about women (3), and through the subsequent channeling of women's energy and power into serving males as heads of households. The call for action in v. 31 shows ongoing wrestling with what level of agency for women will produce maximum return before tipping the scale into loss. In the beginning of the chapter, the mother warns, "Do not give to women your *chayil*…" but at the end, someone is ordering, "Give to her …" In v. 31 this giving concerns not men's *chayil* but "the fruit of *her* hands." This amounts to what is, in essence, her own *chayil,* giving back to her what has already been expended once on behalf of others and is likely to be similarly expended again. We see profound male self-interest asserted in the text.

Women in Proverbs 31 are not only subjects of debate themselves but also figures that facilitate identity construction of the community overall. We have already noted how they are used to channel men's desires. According to Ehud Ben Zvi, in the ancient world a society wanting to assert dominance would cast itself as male, but Israel, under the thumb of empire, frequently portrayed itself as female, because dominated by another.[28] So the femininity of the *eshet chayil* works to image this community within the Persian empire. Her approach to living — hard-working, engaging trade, strategic, committed to community — ought to be all Israel's approach as well.

Just as v. 30 acknowledges *chen* as a feminine tactic of persuasion, so the chapter

[28] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Othering, Selfing, 'Boundarying' and 'Cross-Boundarying' as Interwoven with Socially Shared Memories: Some Observations." In *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period,* eds. Ehud Ben-Zvi and Diana V. Edelman (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 33.

overall can be viewed as an exercise of *chen* in the spirit of an Esther, a Delilah, and many other biblical figures. Verses 1-9 deploy the emotional pull of a mother's rebuke to pull a male audience into defensive posture in face of accusation; then vv. 10-30 soften them with the dangled carrot of an honored life, setting them up for a challenge to act in v. 31 that would be harder to resist following the double whammy of a mother's correction and a tickling of desire. So the chapter itself is illustrating the strategic tactic of tricky self-preservation being urged upon the community to the extent that it views itself as marginalized and powerless.

Yet another way the female figures of Proverbs 31 facilitate identity construction of the community concerns their affinity with the depiction of wisdom as female in Proverbs 1 and 8. In these chapters the feminized wisdom cries out in the gates, the public square, challenging foolish behavior and offering correction (1.20-21, 8.1-3). In Proverbs 31, the notion of rebuke also occurs via Lemuel's mother, extending into the tension-pocked utopia of the acrostic that culminates in verse 31's command set within the city gates. All this forces a community to recognize that it does have things to work out, that the city gates, representing the community as a whole, is witnessing behaviors and attitudes that harm some while benefitting others, and both these entities must speak their "wisdom" in the city gates.

Another feature of note in Proverbs 31 as concerns its work within community is the emphasis on economic activity. According to Ben Zvi, utopias ignore those features of society that are working well and are therefore taken for granted. They instead depict in counterfactual fashion what needs working out.[29] So the peace and prosperity depicted

[29] Ehud Ben Zvi, "The 'Successful, Wise, Worthy Wife' of Proverbs 31:10-31 as a Source for Reconstructing Aspects of Thought and Economy in the Late Persian / Early Hellenistic Period," in *The*

in Proverbs 31.10-30 resists stresses of daily life such as taxes, Persian rule, temple authority, and so on. The emphasis on production and sale of goods encourages more of the same.[30] And the powerful, effective *eshet chayil* inspires a reading community with a sense of their own agency they may not truly possess.

Ben Zvi, unusual among scholars, sees more in the mention of the poor (20) than the virtue of charity. For him, it may validate pursuit of profit beyond the needs of an individual household or recommend a patronage system of societal organization.[31] According to my more detailed analysis, the *eshet chayil*'s interaction with the poor depicted in the chiasm of vv. 19-20 conveys at the very least ambivalence about them, and more likely, antagonism. As explained in chapter three, v. 20 depicts the *eshet chayil* reaching out forcefully to the poor in what could constitute either giving or taking. Is she giving them food, clothing, shelter, and could this be not disinterested charity but a means of obligating them to her? Is she taking them into her household, speaking up for them in court, or any other actions the justice would require? The text does not actually characterize her actions with modifiers conveying justice, righteousness, generosity or so forth.

Readers ought to notice such coyness of the text. Close examination of the vocabulary employed and intertextual associations suggests that the *eshet chayil* and the "poor and needy" relate in adversarial fashion. Very likely, she ensnares them. They are the plunder she brings back to the husband, from whom they extract land, labor, harvest, and more. Is this the priority of the poem, its main point, to surface tensions between the

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Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context, eds. Marvin Lloyd Miller, et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 41.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., 31-32.

elites and the peasants? If we pursue a monologic understanding of texts, then such would seem more likely if these sentiments were to appear at the center of this chiastic poem, at v. 23. The husband sitting at the gates is central, garnering all the significance that implies. According to such channeling interpretation, the *eshet chayil* off-center, thrusting her hands toward the poor, is just one of many engagements that must occur to ensure his presence there. Dialogically, though, words of protest against systemic oppression could only be expected to arise from the margins. And so the harsh depiction of the *eshet chayil* off-center in vv. 19-20 perfectly fits a protest of central importance to the poor.

Small wonder there exists in the land those who are afflicted, dying, lacking the barest necessities of life, as Lemuel's mother observes (5-9). But what is to be done? Lemuel's mother wants her son to reign, to preserve his own *chayil:* strength, wealth, progeny (3). And she wants justice for the poor. Can she have it both ways? Her dilemma is the *golah*'s dilemma. Within this tension the acrostic following the mother's rebuke functions effectively as a son's talk back to conflicting expectations. He shows via the fantasy of vv. 10-30 that if he is to prosper as his mother desires, he will need land and workers. To get these, he will need a woman, one possessing the dangerous, devious qualities likely stimulating her warning against women in the first place (3). Lemuel's message is, "I and this woman will need to take land (16), and we will need to co-opt workers (20), and then I can sit in the gate (23)." Thus v. 31 culminates Lemuel's lengthy reply by saying, in effect: if you want so much for me, this is what I need: some other one onto whom I can project the dirty work requisite for thriving in this land. "Give to her from the fruit of her 'hands,' " means: free her up in all her wealth-generating activity —

including coercion of the "hands" — the peasant class. Then: "… her 'works' [all we elites] will praise her in the gates."

Reflections on Significance for Readers Today

We have come far in this exploration of Proverbs 31. My aim to uncover new meanings via attention to narrative elements and their identity-constructing work, I trust, has been accomplished. Although language of plenty and praise constructs a statically prosperous world, expressions of desire and lack and tensions among characters resist that happy landscape. They establish Proverbs 31 as a text of ongoing "social negotiation."[32]

Because Proverbs 31 supplies a rare exception to biblical texts' typically male subjects, readers today who revere the Bible turn to it for insights regarding how women ought to be. In the United States, signs of Proverbs 31's influence pepper the Christian women's blogosphere, for example, avirtuouswoman.org advising: *"Husband's aren't usually too hard to keep happy if they are getting the big three at home from their wife. Good food, a clean house, and a wife who doesn't withhold sex."*[33] In Africa, Ezra Chitando claims that African interpretations of Proverbs 31 have worsened the spread of HIV infection among women. This is because, Chitando argues, conservative Christian leaders teach that Proverbs 31 promotes meekness and silence, thus conditioning wives not to advocate for protection, information, or other vital resources.[34] In addition, he writes, many African men influenced by Proverbs 31 argue that they have "bought" their

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[32] A phrase employed by Danna Nolan Fewell in "The Ones Returning: Ruth, Naomi and Social Negotiation in the Post-Exilic Period." In *Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible.* Edited by Katherine Southwood and Martien Halvorsen-Taylor: 23-40. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018.

[33] Melissa Ringstaff, "The Heart of Her Husband: Day 11," *A Virtuous Woman*, accessed 31 Jan. 2017. https://avirtuouswoman.org/the-heart-of-her-husband-day-11/ (sic)

[34] Ezra Chitando, " 'The Good Wife': A phenomenological Re-Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31 in the Context of HIV/AIDS In Zimbabwe," *Scriptura* 86 (2004), 153.

wives and are free to have sex with them anytime and in any manner they want.[35] Thus the virus spreads.

Blogger Stephen Altrogge, husband of a "burdened" Proverbs 31 wife, cautions that the poem is "not a cattle prod for husbands."[36] Of course, such would not need to be said if there were not some sense that Proverbs 31 *is* used this way. Scripture as cattle prod: the image conveys assumptions about biblical texts: that they are authoritative instructions, a monologic decree of how things ought to be, to which the faithful must submit. It also reflects a common presupposition that biblical texts assert standards by which to evaluate personal behavior and moral character, either one's own or that of someone else. Through such use, biblical texts control behavior and damage the identities of those associated with whatever limiting or negative concepts appear in the texts. For Proverbs 31, women become conditioned to please others, especially men, and are never quite sure if they succeed. Because this reading strategy focuses on a text's presumed main characters and positions all others in relation to them, the peasant class of Proverbs 31 functions only to decorate to the identity constructions of the elites: Lemuel and his mother, the *eshet chayil* and her husband. As identified, independent subjects, the peasant class do not even warrant mention in contemporary interpretations.

My socio-narratological analysis improves upon such practice by shifting readers from passively receiving the text to actively tracing its polyphony, seeking to understand how many voices speak and what interests they advance. This is a freeing strategy for readers because it allows more options for them to identify with than traditional reading

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Altrogge, Stephen, "Do I Want My Wife To Be A Proverbs 31 Woman? Sorta, Kinda, Maybe," *The Blazing Center*, 18 Feb. 2015, accessed 31 Jan. 2017. https://theblazingcenter.com/2015/02/do-i-want-my-wife-to-be-a-proverbs-31-woman-sorta-kinda-maybe.html

strategies offer. It equips readers to challenge or reject some views in the text, knowing that — as its gaps, ambiguities and contradictions prove — these can never comprise the entirety of the discussion. Furthermore, a socio-narratological analysis reinforces the incomplete nature of textual responses as they respond to social circumstances. Always more can be said, including whatever the reader thinks and wants to say, bringing their own ideas of justice, truth or other values to join the conversation.

This examination of Proverbs 31 has expanded understanding of how, although women are characters and important to the text, they are only partly the subject of what is going on. Communal wellbeing is also at issue, and maximizing males' and elites' experience of it. Recognizing this can aid readers in resisting damaging identity constructions such as those mentioned above. Understanding tensions and contradictions as reflecting societal issues and the varying perspectives of conflicting interest groups can free those engaging the text today to process it as event facilitating personal and structural change. These changes may pertain to our societal, political, or familial roles, the spaces we occupy and how we occupy them, to our agency in providing for ourselves and our families, our skills and access to economic productivity, our responsibility to seek justice for ourselves and others, and many more concerns touched upon in Proverbs 31. We need not merely listen, mute, as Lemuel at first appears, submitting to a monologic lecture, as many presume a true *eshet chayil* would do. The multiplicity of competing voices that our dialogic approach unearths can free any one of us to step into a public square, raise our voices loud, and cry out for what we want and need.

EPILOGUE

"PROVERBS 31"

1. The words of King Lemuel, the burden with which his mother rebuked him:
2. "What, my son — and what! son of my womb; and what, son of my vows!?
3. Do not give to women your strength, or your ways to those who would sweep away
   kings."
4. "Not for kings, Lemuel, not for kings the drinking of wine, or for princes, beer."
5. "… Lest he should drink and forget decrees or change verdicts of the sons of
   oppression."
6. " 'Give beer to the perishing,
   and wine to the bitter of soul' —
7. Let *him* drink and forget his poverty;
   let *him* not remember his toil anymore."
8. "Open your mouth for the speechless,
   on behalf of all who are perishing.
9. Open your mouth — judge rightly!
   Plead the case of the oppressed and needy."
10. A woman of strength, who can find?
    Her value is far beyond corals.
11. Her husband puts full confidence in her
    and never lacks plunder.
12. She supplies for him good things,
    not bad, all the days of her life.
13. She pursues wool and flax
    and applies her hands with pleasure.
14. She is like trading ships;
    From far away she brings her food.
15. And she rises while it is still night
    and provides prey to her house
    and assigned tasks to her girls.
16. She schemes about a field and grabs it;
    From the fruit of her hand she plants a vineyard.
17. She binds her loins with power
    and braces her arms.
18. She knows that her trading is good,
    and her lamp does not go out at night.
19. She thrusts her hands toward the spindle;
    Her palms grasp the spindle-whorl.
20. Her palms she stretches toward the poor;

Her hands she thrusts toward the needy.
21. She does not fear snow for her household,
because all of them are clothed in double layers.
22. She makes bed coverings for herself;
Linen and purple are her clothes.
23. Known at the gates is her husband,
in his sitting with the elders of the city.
24. Fine linen wraps she makes and sells;
Woven belts she delivers to traders.
25. Power and honor are her garments,
and she laughs about the days to come.
26. She opens her mouth with wisdom;
teaching communal commitment.
27. She surveys the actions of her house,
for laziness does not eat bread.
28. Her sons arise and bless her,
her husband, and he praises her.
29. "Many daughters act with strength,
but you, you ascend above them all."
30. Favor is false and beauty a vapor;
A woman — fear of Yahweh — she! *She* will be praised.
31. Give to her from the fruit of her hands,
and her works will praise her in the gates.

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