

A Strong Woman (Prov 31:10-31)

by Carol Meyers

The book of Proverbs has a surprise ending. Most of this book sets forth societal values, giving the ancient audience (probably elite young men) practical instruction about how to navigate the moral difficulties of daily life. Its poetic proverbs, like those found in other Near Eastern sources, are considered wisdom literature, a genre typically offering advice gained from experience. But then, after hundreds of pithy maxims and astute insights, the last 22 verses of Proverbs present the many attributes and accomplishments of an *eshet-chayil*, or “woman of strength.” This meaning of the term is obscured by translations that render it “capable wife” or “competent wife” or even “good wife” or “wife of noble character.” The basic meaning of the Hebrew word describing the woman is clearly “strength.” And while moral excellence is among her attributes, the dominant portrait is one of the physical and personal powers (e.g., Prov 31:17) that allow her to accomplish in exemplary fashion the myriad tasks of household life.

Does this really reflect the lives of women in the period of the Hebrew Bible?

This last section of Proverbs is an acrostic poem, each line beginning sequentially with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It thus takes on the quality of an A to Z compendium of all that a woman does. Yet it is not a complete catalogue of a woman’s activities in the largely self-sufficient households of Hebrew Bible times, for it focuses on some activities and omits others. For example, textile work is mentioned frequently (Prov 31:13, Prov 31:19, Prov 31:22, Prov 31:24), but there is only the vaguest allusion (Prov 31:15) to the many food-preparation tasks necessary for household life, and the religious rituals carried out by women are never mentioned.

In other ways too, this poem is detached from reality. For one thing, it hardly reflects the lives of all women. Note these details: the woman of the poem has servants (Prov 31:15); she and her family wear luxury garments (Prov 31:21-22); her husband is involved in civic matters rather than agricultural labor (Prov 31:23); she has access to imported food (Prov 31:14); and she has a surplus of resources that enables her to be charitable (Prov 31:20). These features indicate that she is a well-to-do urban woman, not at all representative of the roughly 90% of women who lived in peasant households. Also, the poem presents the woman as a paragon of virtue: flawless in her relationships with her husband (Prov 31:11-12), children (Prov 31:28), and servants (Prov 31:15); laudable in her charitable work (Prov 31:20); and unsurpassed in her wisdom and piety (Prov 31:26, Prov 31:29, Prov 31:30). Yet no woman is without some failings or occasional lapses!

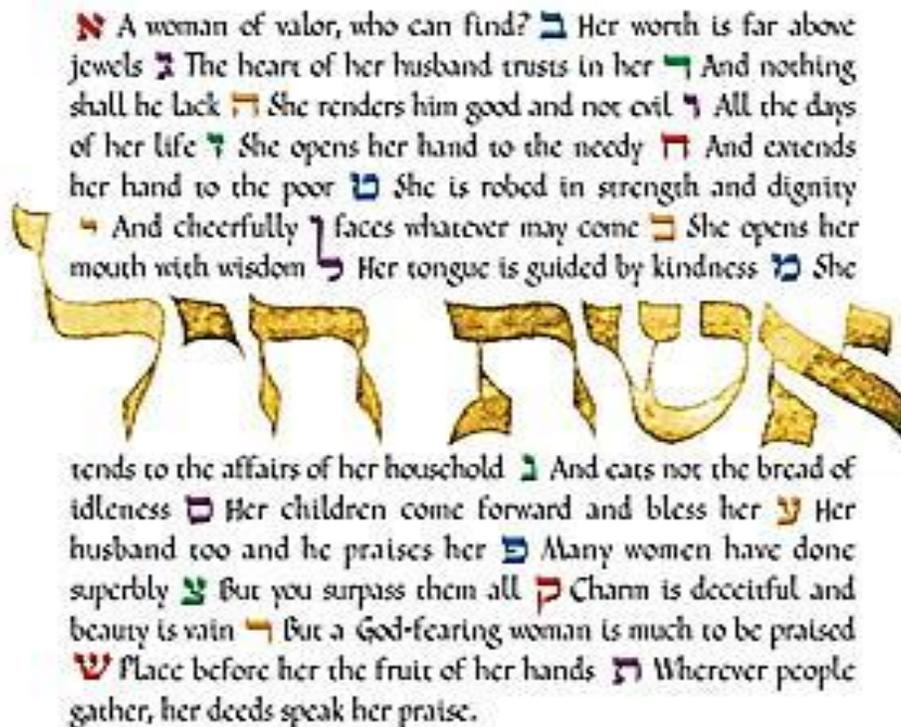
What can this poem tell us about women’s lives?

Although this is an idealized portrait, many details of Prov 31:10-31 reflect aspects of elite women’s lives. Like much of wisdom literature, it is probably drawn from the experience and observations of the author. The woman of the poem is an industrious household manager (Prov 31:27). She not only performs many of the daily tasks essential for the well-being of her household; she also makes decisions about the allotment of human and economic resources. That is, she directs the labor of household members (Prov 31:15), engages in the production and sale of goods (Prov 31:13, Prov 31:18, Prov 31:24), and purchases property that she then puts to productive use (Prov 31:16). This autonomous ability of a woman to enact commercial transactions is actually reflected in archaeological discoveries: stamp seals used to “sign” business documents sometimes bear women’s names.

In depicting a strong woman who makes decisions about social and economic matters, Prov 31:10-31 conveys information that challenges common notions about women in the period of the Hebrew Bible’s composition—for example, that they were sequestered, subordinate, and “only wives and mothers.” To be sure, some aspects of the poem make it seem, from today’s perspective, like the portrait of an enabler—working hard for the benefit of others with little to gain for herself. However, in biblical days, when the household was the primary social and economic unit, women’s managerial roles and productive labor were arguably as important and rewarding as men’s activities in ordinary households as well as elite ones. The concluding passage of Proverbs, which depicts a “woman of strength,” provides clues about women’s lives in biblical antiquity.

Did you know...?

- The extensive series of action verbs in Prov 31 describe an elite woman's activities; they suggest the dynamic nature of her life.
- Chapter 31 is the last section of the book of Proverbs; it thus forms a bookend with the personified Woman Wisdom who dominates the first part of the book (chaps. 1-9). This framework suggests that women encompass the "wise" life set forth in intervening chapters.
- In Iron Age society, the household was the workplace, in contrast to the separation of home and work in contemporary industrialized societies. Being a wife was not simply relational; it entailed major economic responsibilities.
- Prov 31:10-31 directly follows a passage (Prov 31:1-9) containing the instructions of a royal mother to her son. Prov 31 as a whole thus includes pedagogy as an important component (alluded to in Prov 31:26), of a woman's role.
- In traditional Jewish households men chant Prov 31:10-31 at the beginning of the Sabbath; it is also sometimes recited at the funerals of Jewish women.
- Feminists view Prov 31:10-31 both positively and negatively. Some take a present-day perspective, claiming that phrases like "more precious than jewels" (v. 10) objectifies the woman and commodifies her activities; and others emphasize that her independence in economic and other matters is important for countering stereotypes



Carol Meyers, "Strong Woman (Prov 31:10-31)", n.p. [cited 25 Sep 2017]. Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/443/passages/main-articles/strong-woman-prov-31> Carol Meyers is the Mary Grace Wilson Professor of Religion at Duke University. An archaeologist as well as a biblical scholar with a special interest in gender in the biblical world, she has served as a consultant for many media productions dealing with the Bible. Her hundreds of publications include commentaries on Exodus and on several biblical prophets; a reference work, *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 2000); and *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford University Press, 2012) about female subservience in the period of the Hebrew Bible.

The Valiant Woman (Proverbs 31:10-31)

Bible Commentary / Produced by TOW Project



A remarkable connection between the book of Proverbs and the world of work occurs at the end of the book. Lady Wisdom, who we meet at the beginning of the book (Prov. 1:20-33, 8:1-9:12), reappears in street clothes in the final 22 verses of the book (Prov. 31:10-31) as a living, breathing woman, termed “the virtuous woman” (KJV).

Some translators use “wife” instead of “woman,” probably because the woman’s husband and children are mentioned in the passage. (Both “wife” and “woman” are possible translations of the Hebrew *ishshah*.) Indeed, she finds fulfillment in her family and ensures that “her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land” (Prov. 31:23). But the text focuses on the woman’s work as an entrepreneur with a cottage industry and its servants/workers to manage (Prov. 31:15). Proverbs 31:10-31 does not merely apply to the workplace; it takes place in a workplace.

The book of Proverbs is summarized, then, in a poem praising a woman who is the wise manager of diverse enterprises ranging from weaving to wine making to trade in the market. Translators variously use the words “virtuous” (KJV), “capable” (NRSV), “excellent” (NASB), or “of noble character” (NIV) to describe this woman’s character in Prov. 31:10. But these terms fail to capture the element of strength or might present in the underlying Hebrew word (*chayil*).

When applied to a man, this same term is translated “strength,” as in Prov. 31:3. In a great majority of its 246 appearances in the Old Testament, it applies to fighting men (e.g., David’s “mighty warriors,” 1 Chronicles 7:2). Translators tend to downplay the element of strength when the word is applied to a woman, as with Ruth, whom English translations describe as “noble” (NIV, TNIV), “virtuous” (NRSV, KJV) or “excellent” (NASB). But the word is the same, whether applied to men or women. In describing the

woman of Proverbs 31:10-31, its meaning is best understood as strong or valiant, as further indicated by Prov. 31:17, “She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.” Al Wolters argues on account of such martial language that the most appropriate translation is “Valiant Woman.”

Accordingly, we will refer to the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 as the “Valiant Woman,” which captures both the strength and the virtue carried by the Hebrew *chayil*. The concluding passage in the book of Proverbs characterizes this woman of strength as a wise worker in five sets of practices in her workplace. The high importance of this section is signaled in two ways. First, it is in the form of an acrostic poem, meaning that its lines begin with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in order, making it memorable. Second, it is placed as the climax and summary of the entire book. Accordingly, the five sets of practices we observe in the Valiant Woman will serve as a framework for exploring the entire book.

To some people in the ancient near east, and even to some now, portraying a woman as a model of wise entrepreneurship would be surprising. Despite the fact that God gave the gift of work to men and women equally (Genesis 1 and 2), women’s work has often been denigrated and treated with less dignity than men’s. Following the example of the book, we will refer to this wise worker as she, understanding that God’s wisdom is available equally to men and women. She functions in the book as an affirmation of the dignity of every person’s work.

As always in the book of Proverbs, the way of wisdom flows out of the fear of the Lord. After all the Valiant Woman’s abilities and virtues are described and honored, the source of her wisdom is revealed. “A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (Prov. 31:30).

Women's Place within Their Households' Economy

(Taken from *Women in Ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible* by Susan Ackerman, Oxford Research Encyclopedia)



As intimated just above, as well as elsewhere in the preceding comments, the majority of ancient Israelite households were not aristocratic, or even what we might think of as middle-class. Rather, at least during the pre-exilic period of Israelite history (c. 1200–586 BCE), it is estimated that 80–90 percent of the population lived in the villages of the ancient Israelite countryside, in relatively small homes that seemed to function as self-sufficient farmhouses. These homes' layout, for example—a central courtyard that served as the entry portal, flanked by three or so rooms that were arranged in a U-shape around it—provided space (in the central courtyard and in the broadroom that was located to the rear of the courtyard) for food-processing activities and for the significant amount of food storage that would be necessary within a self-sufficient agricultural household. Facilities for small-scale craft production (tool, textile, and pottery making, for example) may also have been present.

Many scholars—most notably Carol Meyers—have attempted to describe what gender roles may have been like within this agriculturally based, self-sufficient household economy. We can imagine, for example, that men undertook the physically demanding task of developing farm land for cultivation, both by clearing previously forested tracts of trees and stones to create fields for growing grain and by building the stone retaining walls that transformed the slopes of the southern Levant's central hill country—the heartland of ancient Israelite settlement—into artificially flat terraces that were used for cultivating olive trees and grape vines. Men probably did the work as well of plowing and otherwise tending the fields and terraced gardens that they had created (see, e.g., 1 Sam. 8:12). Men also took primary responsibility for reaping, threshing, and winnowing their fields' grain when harvest time arrived—but note Ruth 2:3, 8–9, 15–16, 22–23, where women, including Ruth, glean grain left behind by male reapers.

In one verse in Proverbs, moreover, a woman is said to plant a vineyard (Prov. 31:16, although there is some ambiguity about the subject of the verb “to plant” in the text as it has come down to us). More important, though, are the tasks women most likely undertook in processing harvested grain and other foodstuffs, as is suggested by a 1973 ethnographic survey that determined that women do the work of food processing in all but three or four of the 185 societies world-wide from which data on human labor patterns were collected. Women’s role in food processing is in addition indicated by texts such as Leviticus 26:26; 1 Samuel 8:13; 28:24; 2 Samuel 13:8; and 1 Kings 17:12–13. The processes that pertained to the making of bread were especially labor-intensive. Meyers estimates, for example, that the task of grinding grain to make flour—identified as women’s work in Exodus 11:5; Isaiah 47:2; Job 31:10; and Ecclesiastes 12:3—would have occupied two or more hours of an ancient Israelite woman’s time every day. Meyers has furthermore argued that women, having undertaken this labor-intensive responsibility for grinding grain into flour and then using it to prepare dough and bake bread, along with preparing other foodstuffs for their families’ consumption, would have also undertaken the responsibility for distributing food, especially bread, within their households. This is indicated as well in biblical texts such as Leviticus 26:26, which speaks of women distributing bread by weight to those on whose behalf they had baked it.

The same ethnographic survey that determined that women do the work of food processing in all but three or four of 185 societies world-wide further determined that women do the work of weaving and spinning in 84 and 87 percent, respectively, of the cultures surveyed, which corresponds to the many biblical texts—e.g., Joshua 2:6; Judges 16:13–14; 2 Kings 23:7; Ezekiel 13:17–18; and Proverbs 31:10–31—that associate women with textile production. Domestic pottery production, if ethnographic data (especially those from Cyprus and other Mediterranean and Levantine locations) are any guide, was another task assumed by women.

Meyers has commented at length on the significance of these data, arguing that “women’s productive activities, carried out in ... households, were dynamic elements in the social and political fabric of their communities,” so much so that “power accrued to women ... because of their control of certain productive tasks.” Women, that is, because they played key roles in sustaining their households, made integral contributions to their households’—and so their communities’—economic well-being. Simultaneously, as already discussed, women, through their work as childbearers (and also through their kindred work in childrearing) made integral contributions to their households’—and so their communities’—demographic well-being. Nevertheless, because the Hebrew Bible, as noted above, is in many respects a man’s book, and because it is even more so a book of “great men”—warlords, kings, prophets, priests—the contributions women made to benefit the households of “ordinary” Israelites are only rarely visible within the Bible’s pages.