

WOMEN BEAR GOD’S IMAGE: CONSIDERATIONS FROM A NEGLECTED PERSPECTIVE

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The book of Proverbs has been esteemed for centuries. Embedded in the wisdom literature of the OT, it is found in all Jewish lists of the canonical books. The book is also quoted in the NT,¹ as the apostles apply it to the church. Editors of the UBS list about 60 citations of direct quotations, definite allusion, and literary parallels of Proverbs in the NT, including Peter’s use of Prov 26:11 with reference to false teachers: “Of them the proverbs are true: ‘A dog returns to its vomit,’ and ‘a sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud’” (2 Pet 2:22).²

The apostles used Proverbs to instruct the church how to live godly lives: Give generously according to your ability (2 Cor 8:12, cf. Prov 3:2, 7); live humbly before God and people because “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas 4:5, 1 Pet 5:5; cf. Prov 3:34); “Fear the Lord and the king” (1 Pet 2:17, cf. Prov 24:21); “Make level paths for your feet (Heb 12:13, cf. Prov 4:26); and “If your enemy is hungry, feed him” (Rom 12:20, cf. Prov 25:21–22).³ Jesus’s acknowledgment of the wisdom of Solomon⁴ is further evidence of the importance of the material.

Both women and men are given instruction in the thirty-one chapters of Proverbs. The concluding verses (31:10–13) are often used to contend against public female leadership, especially ecclesial, arguing that a woman’s place is in the home, taking care of the family. However, this passage should be given another look (along with the rest of Proverbs), for it will be seen that a woman exercises equal spiritual authority in the home along with her husband—and that she is also a leader in the community. Moreover, family tasks are shared by wife and husband. The two equally reflect the attributes and activities of God himself in whose image they both are created.

This study first briefly overviews of the book of Proverbs which provides the context for its concluding passage. Close attention is then focused on Prov 31:10–31.

¹Rom 3:15 [1:16]; 12:16 [3:7], 20 [25:12–22]; Heb 12:5–6 [3:11–12]; Jas 4:6 [3:34], 13 [27:1]; 1 Pet 2:17 [24:21]; 4:8 [10:12], 18 [11:31]; 2 Pet 2:22 [26:11].

²NKJV is used throughout this article.

³Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 126–27.

⁴Matt 12:42.

The Book of Proverbs

Proverbs is sometimes unfortunately seen as a collection of disconnected, even random, sayings that are studied without their context. Indeed, the bulk of the book, beginning in 10:1 and extending almost to the end, consists of short sayings often inviting such analysis. However, many of the connections in the original language are not as obvious in English translation.

Some scholars do note that Proverbs is more than unconnected material. Rather, it is a insightfully arranged book from the God of all wisdom and not merely evolving from human reflection.⁵ Having “the fear of Yahweh” (e.g. 1:7, 2:5) is vital, and the thirty-one chapters are guides to learn and understand this.⁶

This article does not deal with authorship and dating issues directly, but does work within the assumption that the received text of Proverbs was intentionally arranged. It is generally agreed that the thirty-one chapters consist of several sections (chs. 1–9; 10:1–22:16; 22:17–24:22; 24:23–34; chs. 25–29; 31:1–9; 31:10–31), each having a superscription.⁷ OT wisdom literature (including Proverbs), along with the historical books, affirms that Israelite canonical wisdom was divinely inspired and includes counsel for both women and men. The instruction of children is carried out by mother and father, confirming the equal importance of both parents: “My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother” (Prov 1:8).⁸ Daniel Treier rightly suggests:

⁵“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (Jas 1:5).

⁶Andrew Steinmann is correct: “Attempting to comment on the wisdom of Proverbs is a humbling task for anyone who takes the Word of God seriously. The insights in this book of the wisdom of the infinite God simply cannot be exhausted. As the truth of God, it contains the power of the Almighty to reconcile to Himself all people, to build up the faithful, and to comfort those who grieve. That power of the Gospel is what has made Proverbs a loved and cherished book among God’s people. In it the Father reveals the glory of His Son as Wisdom who would, generations after Solomon’s day, become flesh. That wisdom is the One greater than Solomon (Matt 12:42), and He is the Wisdom that Solomon reveals to us. Studying the book of Proverbs gives the opportunity to learn of Christ!” (Andrew E. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, ConcC [St. Louis: Concordia, 2009], xvii).

⁷“The headings (or superscripts) in Proverbs, readily divide the book into seven collections (1:1; 10:1; 22:17; :23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1). Though 22:17 lacks a distinct editorial heading, its reference to ‘the sayings of the wise,’ its distinctive form, and its integrity with 22:1–21, referring among other things to the ‘thirty sayings’ in 22:20 (emended), clearly set these verses apart as the first of the thirty sayings. The editorial superscript to the next collection, ‘These *also* are sayings of the wise’ (24:23), puts the identification of 22:17–24:22 as the third collection in Proverbs beyond reasonable doubt” (Bruce Waltke, *Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, 9).

⁸See also Deut 6:4–9.

Reading Proverbs ought to provoke questioning our own cultural prejudices just as much as ancient ones. Proverbs challenges modern men and women alike to rethink notions of the profound importance of parenting along with bringing blessings to the wider community in the book's world view . . . intensifying our commitment to the foundational divine design."⁹

Treier continues, that according to Proverbs, the proper orientation of all earthly parenting mirrors God's "parenting" of His human family, underscoring the tremendous privilege of both mother and father imitating God at a creaturely level:

bringing forth, providing for, protecting, and nurturing life on behalf of God, so that each child can develop into a wise person—fearing God whose wisdom began it all. The gracious fellowship of the Father and Son and Spirit models earthly parenting.¹⁰

Karl Barth goes so far as to say that Proverbs "can be read as a large-scale commentary on the fifth commandment . . ."¹¹

Proverbs states its broad goals as it opens: instruction for the inexperienced (1:4); necessity of wisdom (1:2–4, 6); the "fear of the Lord" as the foundation of wisdom (1:7a; 9:10); with fools disregarding and/or despising such wisdom (1:2–7).¹²

Notably, Proverbs also begins and concludes with literary portraits of women. The initial chapters compare the woman, Wisdom, with a Woman of Folly. Wisdom is found in public places as a personified¹³ female figure, her importance underscored in several passages:¹⁴ There are speeches about her¹⁵ and by her¹⁶ as she calls out to the young and the foolish, urging them to heed her

⁹Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 113.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 114.

¹¹Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. 3 of *Church Dogmatics*, trans. A.T. Mackay et al. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1961), 249. The fifth commandment calls for the honoring of both father and mother (Exod 20:12).

¹²Following these opening sentiments, parental lessons unfold with poetic intensity, instructing that a young person's choices to live wisely or foolishly are affected by their choices.

¹³Personification is the "attribution of personal form, nature, or characteristics; the representation of a thing or abstraction as a person; esp. as a rhetorical figure or species of metaphor" (*Oxford English Dictionary* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1989] 11:604). The personification of places, things, and abstract qualities is not uncommon in the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁴1:20–33; 3:13–18; 4:4–9; 7:4–5; 8:1–11. Prov 9:11 seems to provide the motivation for the injunction in 9:6 and thereby is interpreted here as the conclusion to Wisdom's speech (see M.V. Fox, "Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9," *JBL* 116 [1997]: 616 n. 7).

¹⁵1:20–21; 3:13–18; 4:4–9; 7:4–5; 8:1–3; 9:1–3.

¹⁶1:22–33; 8:4–36; 9:4–6, 11.

important instruction. She speaks what is noble, right, and true (8:6–11), leading in the way of righteousness and justice (8:20)—and heeding her instructions would bring rich blessings of life (3:16). Yet she is often ignored (1:24–25).

Wisdom builds her house, arranges a feast, and sends out her maidservants to invite her guests (9:1–6). Jesus later clearly uses this metaphor in a parable with a man carrying out these tasks (Luke 14:16–25).

Prov 3:13–18 on the woman, Wisdom, is immediately followed with a bold shift of the object of praise—Yahweh now takes center stage (3:19, the inversion of the subject and verb indicating emphasis)¹⁷ linking to the creation of the world. Wisdom is now the divine Creator: “Yahweh by [means of] Wisdom founded the earth” (3:19a).

Proverbs concludes with a passage describing a Woman of Strength/Valor. Her actions display the wisdom found throughout the book. Even her involvement in business is highlighted affirmatively and not considered inappropriate. Her works bring her praise in her own right. In striking contrast to the literature of the ancient world that saw women as property and unnecessary (and even shunned) publicly, the woman of Prov 31 is portrayed as morally strong, with discerning wisdom, great physical vigor, and publically honored.

The final twenty-one verses of Proverbs are a literary masterpiece—a skillfully crafted alphabetic acrostic highlighting a woman. Ancient writers could organize their material in ways that sometimes appear unconnected to modern readers. Overlooking this can hamper correct interpretation of a text. Duane Garrett’s insight is keen: “The poem [Prov 31:10–31] is both acrostic and chiasmic in structure. Either one of these is sufficient evidence of the poet’s skill; the integration of the two is astounding.” He posits the following chiasmus:

- A High value of a good wife (v. 10)
- B Husband benefitted by wife (vv. 11–12)
- C Wife works hard (vv. 13–19)
- D Wife gives to poor (v. 20)
- E No fear of snow (v. 21a)
- F Children clothed in scarlet (v. 21b)
- G Coverings for bed, wife wears linen (v. 22).
- H Public respect for husband (v. 23)
- G' Sells garments and sashes (v. 24)
- F' Wife clothed in dignity (v. 25a)
- E' No fear of future (v. 25b)
- D' Wife speaks wisdom (v. 26)
- C' Wife works hard (v. 27)
- B' Husband and children praise wife (vv. 28–29)
- A' High value of a good wife (vv. 30–31)

Garrett then continues:

¹⁷Whybray, *Proverbs* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 68.

The center point of the chiasmus is v. 23, the declaration that the husband is highly regarded at the gate. The verse has been read as almost an intrusion on the poem; all the other verses praise the wife, but this verse alone focuses on the esteem the husband commands. Far from being an intrusion, however, v. 23 actually establishes the central message of the poem; this woman is the kind of wife a man needs in order to be successful in life. . . . It is a false reading, however, to suppose that biblical wisdom despises women or views them as fundamentally corrupt (this poem alone contradicts that notion). There is no double standard; the gender slant in Proverbs is a matter of audience orientation rather than ideological bias.¹⁸

Notably, extended passages of women “frame” or “envelope” the book of Proverbs, forming “bookends.” These “bookends” carry a main theme or “motto”¹⁹ of the book—“the fear of the Lord.” In fact, this phrase forms an *inclusio* around Prov 1–9 (1:7 and 9:10), and also around the book as a whole (1:7 and 31:30).

The Prov 31 portrait of *eshet chayil* (v. 10) portrays a wealthy woman who supervises a household estate with servants, conducts major business affairs including real estate, agriculture (vineyards), and merchandise. Nor does she neglect the poor—a command given by YHWH to both men and women in the OT, and exemplified by Jesus in the NT. She also is renowned for her wisdom—mirroring the woman, Wisdom, in the opening chapters of Proverbs. Like her, the Woman of Strength is: of high value (v. 10; as of a male, 3:13), faithful, dependable (v. 11), energetic [not a sluggard] (vv. 13, 27; 6:6–11), strong (v. 17; as stated of a man in 24:5), benevolent to the poor (v. 20; counsel to male and female—14:21), a wise, loving, and godly teacher (v. 26; 8:32–35, 30).

¹⁸*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC 14 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 248–49. In *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31* ([Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], 515), Bruce Waltke proposes that in addition to being an acrostic, this eulogy to the Valiant Wife is arranged logically. Its broad thematic divisions are:

I. Introduction: her value	10–12
A. Her general worth inferred from her scarcity	10
B. Her worth to her husband	11–12
II. Body: her activities	13–27
A. Her industry	13–18
B. Seam (or janus)	19
C. Her social achievement	20–27
III. Conclusion: her praise	28–31
A. By her family	28–29
B. By all	30–31

¹⁹So J. H. Greenstone, *Proverbs with Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1950), xiii; C. H. Toy, *The Book of Proverbs*, ICC (1899; repr., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1959), 10–11; D. Kidner, *The Proverbs, Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale, 1964), 22; R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 17.

It is incorrect to assert that the Woman of Strength tends to the domestic sphere alone.²⁰ Proverbs's call for wisdom is given to both women and men. And the Woman of Strength in the last chapter is portrayed as the role model. The introduction and conclusion of the passage logically connect her blessing to her husband with his praise of her. The conclusion is also connected chiasmatically with three words: "wife/woman" (vv. 10, 30); "valiant/valiantly" or strength (vv. 10, 29); and "husband" (vv. 11, 28). This highlights the woman's worth both to her family and to the larger community.²¹ This corresponds to other verses in Proverbs where the mother is an authoritative voice with the father. She is mentioned at the book's seams, introducing both the prologue and the proverbs (1:8; 10:1). And in the concluding acrostic, she is commended for having faithful instruction on her tongue.

Wolters sees Prov 31:10–31 as part of Israel's epic poetry which recounts a hero's mighty deeds—often military exploits. He suggests that both the heroic praise psalms and this "song" share: (1) the same structure: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion that calls for praise; (2) a call on inanimate objects to praise (v. 31; Ps 145:10, 13); (3) the so-called hymnic participle (v. 27; Ps 145:10); (4) an ascription of "strength and honor" (v. 25; Pss 93:1; 104:1); (5) the theme of incomparability (v. 29 "praise her") in the conclusion (v. 31). It should also be noted that v. 28 is strikingly similar to "praise Yah" in the Psalms (e.g., Ps 105:48).²²

Wolters also notes several similarities between the Song of Deborah (Judg 5), the women's songs for Saul and David (2 Sam 18, 21), and David's elegy for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1) with the Prov 31 poem: (1) *eshat hayil* (v. 10 may be translated "valiant woman" for *hayil* is frequently found in military contexts); (2) the term forming an *inclusio* around the poem (vv. 10, 29); (3) the repetition of *hayil*, essentially meaning "power" or "prowess," compounded with two occurrences of its synonym "strength" (vv. 17, 25), highlighting her strength; (4) several terms have a military connotation: "plunder" (v. 11); "prey" (v. 15); "she stretches out her hand"—which elsewhere always occurs in an aggressive context; and (5) "extol" (v. 31, i.e., singing a victory song), which occurs elsewhere only in heroic poetry (Judg 5:10; 11:40). (6) Like heroic poetry, the hero is characterized by action, not by physical charms. Furthermore, (7) Heroic poetry celebrates members of the aristocratic class, to which this wealthy woman obviously belongs (cf. vv. 15, 16, 20, 22, 23). (8) She "laughs [in victory]," a warlike term (v. 25) and (9) "girds her loins

²⁰Waltke, *Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, 520.

²¹The itemization of her activity includes her income based on her skill expanded through trading (vv. 13–19), to her accomplishments on an economic base (vv. 20–27); v. 27 is joined with v. 26 by its initial qualifying participle, making them one sentence; counting the seam in v. 19 with the first half of the body and v. 27 as a grammatical unity with v. 26, the two halves of the main body also consist of seven sentences each (Waltke, *Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, 516).

²²Al Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10–31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form-Critical Analysis" *VT* 38 (1988): 446–57, n. 11.

with strength" (v. 17), a masculine and heroic image. Finally, (10) "watching over" dampens the normal Hebrew term for "to reconnoiter" and "to spy."²³

Moreover, Wolters contends that this heroic poem functions as a polemic against the literature in the ancient Near East which viewed females merely as decorative—preoccupied with their physical charms from an erotic point of view. Prov 31, on the other hand, celebrates the Woman of Strength's activity and authority in the affairs of family and also the public sphere.²⁴

Erika Moore contends that the poem's use of military imagery in the domestic sphere presents the Woman of Strength "as a spiritual heir of Israel's ancient heroes" and "a champion for those around her by her diligent application of wisdom." In short, "the valorous wife is a heroic figure used by God to do good for His people, just as the ancient judges and kings did good for God's people . . ."²⁵

The Woman of Strength in this Hebrew poem is diligent, taking charge even in profit-making ventures. She is a wise and kind teacher—and also a philanthropist. Various verses in Proverbs ask the reader (male or female) to watch and listen carefully—for a wise person will want to have wisdom in every area of life.

An analysis of the last twenty-one verses in Proverbs follows.

Proverbs 31:10

More familiar translations of this opening verse read: "Who can find a virtuous woman?" The direct object is the poem's initial words, immediately bringing into focus a Woman of Strength. Jerome rendered the phrase *mulier fortis* ("strong woman"); Jewish translators into English commonly suggest "a woman of valor."

What does it mean for a woman to be described as *hayil*. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, this term regularly refers to forcefulness and strength (Judg 3:29; 1 Sam 2:4; Ps 18:32, 40; Qoh 10:10; Zech 4:6). It is used of men who are: (1) soldiers: designating "armed forces" (Deut 11:4; 1 Chr 20:1; Ezek 17:17) and individual soldiers or groups of soldiers (Josh 1:14; Judg 6:12; 11:1; 20:44, 46; 1 Sam 16:18; 2 Sam 11:16; 24:9; 2 Kgs 24:14; 1 Chr 5:24; 8:40; 12:9; 2 Chr 17:13); (2) brave warriors: (Num 24:18; Deut 3:18; Judg 11:1; 2 Sam 11:16; 1 Chr 11:22).

Elsewhere in the OT, *hayil* refers to wealth and property (Gen 34:29; Num 31:9; Deut 8:17; 1 Kgs 10:2; 2 Chr 9:1; 2 Kgs 15:20; 24:14; Isa 8:4; Jer 15:13; Ezek 28:5; Zech 14:14); and profits from trade (Job 20:18; Ezek 28:5). Men with *hayil* in these contexts are professionals (1 Chr 26:7–9, 30, 32); landowners, and/or community leaders (Exod 18:21, 25; Ruth 2:1)—men of power and capacity, prominence, wealth, and professional skill.²⁶

²³Ibid.

²⁴Wolters, "Heroic Hymn," 517.

²⁵Erika Moore, "The Domestic Warrior" (unpublished paper submitted to Bruce Waltke, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1994), 18.

²⁶See E. F. Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and*

Yet, a woman with *hayil* in Prov 31:10–31, is variously translated as “a good wife,”²⁷ “a capable wife,”²⁸ “the good housewife,”²⁹ “a true lady,”³⁰ or “an ideal wife.”³¹ With only a few exceptions,³² there is obvious reticence to use for a woman the same language of strength, power, and wealth as used for men, despite all evidence to the contrary. The vocabulary and activities in Prov 31:10–31 celebrates a highly-rated hero! Qualities that some may regard as masculine are found with this Woman of Strength implying that she has both a good head for business, personal initiative, and great stamina.

The second phrase in v. 10 suggests an answer to the rhetorical question “Who can find a valiant woman/woman of strength?” The answer implies something rare, equating the strong wife to a valuable treasure.

The assertion “her price is far beyond,”³³ makes clear that she is exceedingly precious. The Lord God speaks of His people in a similar manner: “The Lord their God will save them in that day, As the flock of His people. For they shall be like the jewels of a crown, Lifted like a banner over His land” (Zech 9:16); “They shall be Mine,” says the Lord of hosts, “On the day that I make them My jewels” (Mal 3:17).

Commentary, AB 7 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 90.

²⁷So RSV; Whybray, *Proverbs*, 425–26; K. Aitken, *Proverbs* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 155; D. Cox, *Proverbs with an Introduction to Sapiential Books*, OTM 17 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1982), 250; cf. “Good wife or worthy wife,” in McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife,” 25.

²⁸Clifford argues: “the most suitable title is Hymn to (or perhaps Encomium of) the Capable Wife” (*Proverbs*, 272). See also NRSV; NEB; Scott, *Proverbs/Ecclesiastes*, 185; Waegeman, “The Perfect Wife of Proverbia 31:10–31,” 101; and “the capable woman” in J. J. Collins, *Proverbs/Ecclesiastes*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980), 68–70.

²⁹W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, JSOTSup 26 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 194.

³⁰Scott, *Proverbs/Ecclesiastes*, 186.

³¹Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs*, 154; R. E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, ed. R. Kneirim and G. Tucker, FOTL 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 82.

³²See “strong woman” (K. M. O’Conner, *The Wisdom Literature*, Message of Biblical Spirituality 5 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1988], 77–79), “woman of worth” (Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 90; C. R. Fontaine, “Proverbs” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. Newsom and S. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 151; “woman of valour” (A. Cohen, *Proverbs* [Hindhead, Surrey, UK: Soncino, 1945] 211), and “valiant woman” (Wolters, “Heroic Hymn,” 446–57; idem, “*Šōpiyyā* [Prov 31:27] as Hymnic Participle and Play on Sophia,” *JBL* 104.4 [1985]: 577–87).

³³Lit. “more than beyond corals.”

Proverbs 31:11

The husband has full confidence in her in every area of life because of her good sense, fidelity, industry, enterprising capabilities—and her wisdom.

The statement “his heart trusts *in her*,” implies that his well-being stands or falls on her reliability. This is noteworthy. Outside of this verse, Scripture condemns trust in anyone or anything other than the Lord.³⁴ The present exception in Prov 31 elevates the woman to the highest level of spiritual, and intellectual competence. This implies that such a husband and wife enjoy a strong spiritual relationship. Gerstenberger is perceptive: “Here too wisdom is founded in creation theology. The woman is the ‘fitting helper’ (Gen 2:18).”³⁵

The second half of the couplet reveals what undergirds the husband’s trust: he does not lack anything necessary or of value. The object, “*spoil*” (*salal*—a military metaphor, usually translated “plunder”), implies that the woman knows how to fight for life’s essentials through strategy, strength, and careful calculation,³⁶ reminding that life is a battle.

Proverbs 31:12

“She does him good and not evil all the days of her life.” “All” commonly occurs in summations—preparing the reader for specifics. The subsequent recalling of the Woman of Strength’s deeds thereby continues to define *hayil*.

“Does him good” is a metonymy including all that is spiritually and physically desirable and beneficial to life, heightened by the litotes *not evil* (*lo’-ra*). “[A]ll the days of her life”—all along life’s path she is constant. Her commitment is discerning and true rather than false; unchanging rather than temperamental. She is reliable and not fickle in bad times. Significantly, God’s commitment to his human family is described the same way: “surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life” (Ps 23:6).

Proverbs 31:13

“She seeks wool and flax, And willingly works with her hands.” Other possible translations include “with eager hands,” and even more literally “at the pleasure of her hands.” The second phrase, often translated “with willing hands,” is based on the original word meaning “delight.”³⁷ The noun may also refer to a “matter” or “activity.” In an Aramaic inscription from Sefire,

³⁴ Kgs 18:21–22; Ps 118:8–9; Isa 36:5–6; Jer 48:7–8; Ezk 33:13; Mic 7:5–7. “One can successfully place confidence only in Yahweh, . . . no other entity can be an ultimate object of trust” (E. Gerstenberger, “*bth*,” *TLOT* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994] 1:229).

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶By contrast, see 24:30–34.

³⁷So NRSV, RSV; see also “at the pleasure of her hands” (Clifford, *Proverbs*, 275; cf. Toy, *Proverbs*, 544); “delights to work with her hands” (Scott, *Proverbs/Ecclesiastes*, 185, 187).

it means “business.”³⁸ At Qumran, it is used for specific tasks or assignments done by individuals (CD 14.12; 1QS 3.17). The context of Prov 31 suggests that this sense, namely “work” or “business” is meant—and that positive emotions drive her work.

Delighting to work with her hands or “of which her hands make beautiful things,”³⁹ links her to God Himself during Creation Week. The Creator gets His hands into the soil to create animals and humans—and then pronounces everything “very good.”⁴⁰

Proverbs 31:14

“She is like the merchant ships, She brings her food from afar.” The ambiguity of this expression lends itself to (at least) two interpretations: (1) she buys the food at a location away from home; (2) the food she purchases is itself imported “from afar.” Beyond the usual nourishment gathered from field or trade, she provides tasty delicacies. Like merchant ships importing goods from foreign lands, the Woman of Strength brings food “from afar” to her household, recognizing that mealtime is an important family event.

This again suggests parallels with the divine. The Creator designs the first menu during the creation week: “And God said, ‘See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food’ (Gen 1:29, significantly a plant-based, violence-free diet). Mealtime and eating is part of the “very good” creation.

Notably, in the patriarchal era both men and women cook (Abraham and Sarah, Gen 18:6–8; Jacob, 25:29; Isaac, 26:30; Rebekah, 27:9)—and both men and women are shepherds (Rachel, Gen 29:6; Moses, Exod 3:1). Moreover, God provided 40 years of miracle meals during Israel’s wilderness wandering—feeding them “angels’ food.”⁴¹ In the NT, on two different occasions Jesus fed thousands of miracle meals because He was filled with compassion for the crowds.⁴² After His resurrection, He cooked breakfast by

³⁸J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire*, 2nd ed., *BibOr* 19 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1995), 150 (Sf 3:8); cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 159–60.

³⁹R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 18 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 186.

⁴⁰“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground. . . . Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air . . .” (Gen 2:7, 19). His positive willingness is emphasized in that he knows full well that the human creatures he creates will rise up and kill him someday: “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you *from the foundation of the world*’ (Matt 25:34, emphasis mine); “the Book of Life of *the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world*” (Rev 13:8, emphasis mine).

⁴¹ “[He] had rained down manna on them to eat, And given them bread of heaven. Men ate angels’ food; He sent them food to the full” (Ps 78:24–25).

⁴²Feeding the 5,000: “And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them” (Matt 14:14; cf. Mark 6:34). Feeding the

the sea (John 21:11–13). Jesus is also preparing a banquet for the saved, who will dine at the “marriage supper of the Lamb” where He will be serving: “Those who love and obey God will partake of the marriage supper of the Lamb in the kingdom of God, and Jesus Himself will serve them.”⁴³

Proverbs 31:15

“She arises while it is still night” like a lioness who hunts food. This metaphor of a predator providing food for her young was so shocking that most translators, including the LXX, opt to translate *terep* “food instead of prey.”⁴⁴ However, McCreesh, does not cower:

At the very least, this word represents provisions acquired only after the exercise of great strength, prowess, and ingenuity and would seem to comment on the extraordinary ability of the wife in providing for her household even against great odds. Both *terep* and *salal* therefore, illustrate in a very dramatic way the wife’s ability to provide for those in her charge.⁴⁵

Furthermore, “her rising early” also mirrors God. Through Jeremiah, He speaks of Himself “rising up early” numerous times in a verbal parallel to the Woman of Strength:

“And now, because you have done all these works,” says the Lord, “and I spoke to you, *rising up early* and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you, but you did not answer . . . Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have even sent to you all My servants the prophets, daily *rising up early* and sending them” (Jer. 7:13, 25, emphasis mine).⁴⁶

Arising before dawn obviously implies that the woman of strength is not the proverbial “sluggard.” Even though she has servants (v. 15), she is up first. This is another distinct echo of God Himself who never slumbers or sleeps: “My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth. . . . He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel Shall neither slumber nor sleep. . . .” (Ps 121:2–4).

4,000: “Now Jesus called His disciples to Himself and said, ‘I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. And I do not want to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way’” (Matt 15:32; cf. Mark 8:1–3).

⁴³“The table is not a place where rebellion should be cultivated in the children by some unreasonable course pursued by the parents. The whole family should eat with gladness, with gratitude, remembering that *those who love and obey God will partake of the marriage supper of the Lamb in the kingdom of God, and Jesus Himself will serve them*” (Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 21 vols., [Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1993], 16:63 [emphasis mine]).

⁴⁴Waltke, *Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, 524.

⁴⁵McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31,” *RB* 92 (1985): 41. The woman’s industriousness is emphasized.

⁴⁶See also Jeremiah 11:7; 26:5; 29:19; 32:33; 35:15; cf. 2 Chr 36:15.

She does not feed her family only when it is convenient for her—or even let her servants deal with such issues. She rises early to organize such important matters. This emulates Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve.

Proverbs 31:16

“She considers a field and buys it; From her profits [lit. “the fruit of her hands”] she plants a vineyard.” This verse implies that she has both a good head for business and personal initiative for buying and developing real estate. She is a shrewd business woman, making wise investments. The Woman of Strength increases and solidifies her economic base by personally purchasing a field where *she* then plants a vineyard. Such activity demands tremendous economic savvy along with physical energy.

Planting a vineyard involves digging up the field and clearing it of stones before planting it with vines. Vineyards also call for a watchtower and a winepress. Qualities that some regard as exclusively masculine are manifest in this woman. “She considers”—devising a plan or strategy to act on. After carefully considering all angles, *she* boldly executes *her* plan. The Woman of Strength is obviously knowledgeable of agricultural practices vital at that time.⁴⁷ God also planted a vineyard:

Now let me sing to my Well-beloved, A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes . . . (Isa 5:1–2).

Proverbs 31:17

Literally: “She girds her loins with strength.” “Girding” is an expression of preparation for serious work. “Girding her loins” is a strong metaphor, and again linking strength with this woman.

This verse continues the normally male-linked attributes of this woman. It depicts her in terms similar to that of a warrior as she arms for battle with her waist girded and her arms freed of constraints that would hinder movement.

The idiom “to bind the loins” means to get ready for some “kind of heroic or difficult action,”⁴⁸ such as hard running (1 Kgs 18:46; 2 Kgs 4:29), escape from Egypt (Exod 12:11), or physical labor (Prov 31:17). This thereby points to the strong woman’s physical and spiritual motivation along with the necessary preparation that equips her powerful body. She both resolves to make her arms strong and has the strength and endurance to complete the task she commits herself to—even “some kind of heroic or difficult action.”⁴⁹ Her strength backs up her motivation. After prudent evaluation of a task,

⁴⁷Nehemiah describes people treading winepresses and transporting heaps of grapes and wine to sell in the Jerusalem marketplace (Neh 13:15).

⁴⁸Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “The Book of Proverbs: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *NIB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 5:261.

⁴⁹Van Leeuwen, *Proverbs*, 261.

she has the resolve and endurance to complete it, highlighting her mental and physical preparation plus her competence. This wealthy woman, who has servant girls (v. 15), displays the capacity for the necessary sustained manual labor to plant a vineyard—in addition to manufacturing textiles (vv. 18, 24). The OT portrays strong, capable women.

Yet again, another verbal parallel with God is seen: “The Lord reigns, He is clothed with majesty; *The Lord is clothed, He has girded Himself with strength.* Surely the world is established, so that it cannot be moved” (Ps 93:1, emphasis mine).

Proverbs 31:18

“She perceives that her merchandise is good, And her lamp does not go out by night.” In the OT, references to lamps describe how “in a well-ordered house the lamp burned all night . . . as a sign of life; its extinction marked calamity (Jer 25:10; Job 18:6).”⁵⁰ Even the Sanctuary lamp was never to go out (Exod 27:20; Lev 24:2). This again parallels God who neither slumbers nor sleeps. Moreover, Jesus also employs this language: the church is to keep her lamps brightly burning so that all may see by her light.⁵¹

Proverbs 31:19

“She stretches out her hands to the distaff, And her hand holds the spindle.” This verse suggests the modern conception of “multi-tasking.” God surely is the master—even knowing the number of hairs on our heads (Matt 10:30)! Martin Luther, when translating this verse into German, pictures a woman rocking a cradle with her foot while spinning with her hands. Ancient queens and wealthy women are described or depicted holding a spindle.⁵²

Proverbs 31:20

The verse literally reads that she “opens her palm” to the poor.⁵³ This is the same diligent hand at work in the previous verse. It cannot be the hand of a lazy woman. Her ministry to the afflicted and destitute in the community extends her unselfish heart beyond her family’s needs. A king may open his mouth to defend the poor, but this Woman of Strength actually helps them. Godly men will be doing the same:

⁵⁰Toy, *Proverbs*, 545. Similarly, Selman (“*ner*,” *NIDOTTE* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997] 3:160) says that the lamp symbolized a prosperous household, as in 13:9, and *HALOT* (“*kbbh*,” [Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999] 2:457) interprets the extinguishing of the lamp at night as a “sign of poverty.”

⁵¹“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:15).

⁵²See Jud 16:14 and *ANEP* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954), 43. Also, P. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 59.

⁵³Also, Ps 112:9: “she gives to the poor with liberality.”

Praise the Lord! Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, Who delights greatly in His commandments. . . . he has dispersed abroad, *he has given to the poor*; his righteousness endures forever; his horn will be exalted with honor (Ps 112:9, emphasis mine).⁵⁴

This verse and the preceding one form a chiasm. The initial half is about her hands at work spinning; the second—her hands helping the poor:

- v. 19 A her hands she extends (*yadeyha silleha*)
 B her palms (*kappeyha*) grasp the spindle
 v. 20 B' her palm (*kappah*) spreads out to the poor,
 A' her hands she extends (*yadeyha silleha*) to the needy.

Identical terminology describes both activities as the labor of her hands. As commonly noted by interpreters, the chiasm associates the woman's industriousness with her generosity. The hands that skillfully weave for profit also reach out to serve others, as Van Leeuwen comments, "The hands that grasp to produce open wide to provide [v. 20]."⁵⁵

Concern for the poor is a fundamental value in wisdom literature.⁵⁶ This verse underscores that the hands of the woman of strength are not merely restricted for domestic work. She also benefits others by offering compassion to the poor and needy. Being generous, therefore, this woman is "doing" wisdom, illustrating the parallel in v. 26 where she teaches wisdom.

This brings to mind another comparison with God who calls for the care of the poor—something which Jesus reiterates and demonstrates in the NT. Recall how many of His miracles involved His hands: with children (Matt 19:13); blind man (John 9:5–6); woman with the crippled back (Luke 13:10–13); Nain's halted funeral (Luke 7:11–15), a leper (Mark 1:40–41), etc. Notably, the combination of the verb "stretch out," and the object noun "hand" is commonly used for prayer to God in Scripture.

Proverbs 31:21

"She is not afraid of snow for her household, For all her household is clothed with scarlet." The word "scarlet" can also be translated as "two cloaks," suggesting double garments for warmth—also implying the family is clothed with high quality material. "She is not afraid" indicates that possible future danger does not worry her for she has wisely anticipated family needs.⁵⁷

Another translation could be: "clothed in crimson"—the color of a costly fabric. Producing red dye was expensive, coming from a seashell off the Phoenician coast. It thereby connoted wealth and luxury (cf. Judg 8:26;

⁵⁴See also Proverbs 14:21, 31; 19:17; 22:9.

⁵⁵Van Leeuwen, *Proverbs*, 262; cf. Eph. 4:28.

⁵⁶For example, Deuteronomy 15:7–8 warns against being "tight-fisted" with the poor.

⁵⁷LXX has "clothed;" the Vulgate added "double."

Ezek 27:7, 16; Acts 16:14)—and royalty (used to mock Jesus, Matt. 27:28).⁵⁸ In Rev 19:13, Jesus is described as “clothed with a robe *dipped in blood*” (emphasis mine)—implying crimson color. God has anticipated our great need and graciously provided costly blood-red garments for our salvation.

Proverbs 31:22

“She makes tapestry for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple.” Such clothing is costly and luxurious. Garments dyed with purple indicated wealth and high rank (Esth 8:15). The rich man in one of Jesus’s NT parables (Luke 16:19) was also clothed in purple and fine linen. The problem was not that his clothing. It indicated his wealth—but that he was selfish, unlike the Woman of Strength.

Her concern for quality in her family’s garments (v. 21) is similarly evident in the high quality of her own, including “fine linen.” This fabric is also associated with wealth (e.g., Ezek 16:10, 13) and royalty (1 Chr 15:27). Purple is the color of royal garments (Judg 8:36; Esth 8:15; cf. Mark 15:17, 20; John 19:2, 5), the seat of the king’s palanquin (Song 3:10), and Persian court decorations (Esth 1:6). Scarlet, red-purple, and linen textiles are also the luxurious fabrics of the priestly vestments and the tabernacle.⁵⁹ Along with her strength and business acumen, the Woman of Strength wears garments of dignity and authority (see also v. 25). Jerusalem is described with the same language: “Awake, awake! Put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city!” (Isa 52:1).

Dressing well is not a frivolous concern.

Proverbs 31:23

“Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land.” The city gate is the public ancient “city hall.” There has been no mention of the husband’s wealth in this passage. Instead, the verses repeatedly describe the Woman of Strength—her profits, her investments and her keen business sense. The rank of her husband is just one of her many works to which this passage pays tribute. Moreover, she also is known and praised in the gates for her success as will be seen (v. 31). This challenges the notion sometimes suggested that her husband is free to “make a name for himself” because she tends behind the scenes to his domestic concerns. Rather, the husband’s social prominence among the elders of the land is connected to her. She makes a name for him.

⁵⁸At Ugarit, for example, one scarlet garment cost 18 shekels, while an ordinary, non-scarlet one cost 5 shekels (CTU 4. 146.8; Cf. CTU 4.146.6)

⁵⁹Scarlet was the color of curtains, veils, and other items (Exod 26:1; 35:6, 23, 25; 38:23; Num 4:8). Fine linen was used for the priestly vestments (Exod 28:5, 39; 39:3). Red-purple was the color of priestly garments and other articles (Exod 26:1; 28:6, 15, 31).

Proverbs 31:24

“She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies sashes for the merchants.” The Woman of Strength has the necessary intelligence and skills to be a successful merchant selling for a profit. It is not inappropriate for a woman to engage in public business ventures.

Proverbs 31:25

“Strength and honor are her clothing; She shall rejoice in time to come.” Again, strength is attributed to this woman! She has been heedful of her own and her family’s clothing (vv. 21–22), but most importantly she is clothed with strength and honor—impressive qualities that imply her wisdom.

She is not only “not afraid” (v. 21a) but, even more, she remains positive in any adversity that comes (v. 25b)—“the coming day” (literally, “days in the future”), the unknown future with all its possible difficulties. Like a conqueror, she is not unnerved by her enemies. The praise of this woman’s authoritative qualities can hardly be higher.

Proverbs 31:26

“She opens her mouth with wisdom, And on her tongue is the law of kindness.” The itemized list of her qualities now reaches a climax, turning from her major accomplishments to her teaching the moral and spiritual values that undergird them.⁶⁰ “She opens her mouth” implies ability to speak at length. That she speaks “with wisdom” (*behokma*; see 1:2; cf. 3:19; 24:3) acknowledges that she has it—and that it undergirds what she says and how she says it.⁶¹

Specifically, “loving teaching (*torat-hesed*; cf. 1:8; 3:3; 5:13; 13:14) is on her tongue.” Her teaching is illustrated by her own loving-kindness—she models her instruction (cf. 13:14). The phrase can also be rendered “the law of kindness”—referring to a particular body of teaching about kindness. The wisdom she has is highly valued all through Proverbs—to be sought like silver and hidden or buried treasures (2:4). It is better than gold (16:16a) and costly riches (24:3–4). This Woman of Strength’s life is grounded in true wisdom—and she illustrates it in her life.

In Proverbs, both men and women are equal instructors.⁶² When the father talks to his son about sexual purity, it is appropriate for the father to

⁶⁰Possibly v. 26 is linked with v. 25 by the chiasmic syntax of a nominal clause in the outer frame (vv. 25a, 26b) and a verbal clause in the inner core (vv. 25b, 26a). The chiasmic parallelism of this verse matches in its outer frame the synonymous metonymies for her speech, “she opens her mouth” and “is upon her tongue”; in its inner core it pairs the manner and/or content of her speaking, “with wisdom” and “loving instruction” (Bruce Waltke, *Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, 532, n. 185).

⁶¹Waltke, *Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, 532. Note, too, that the organs of speech (i.e., “mouth”/peh and “tongue”/lason) are both masculine nouns, and the terms denoting the content (i.e., “wisdom”/hokma and “teaching”/tora) are both feminine.

⁶²“My son, hear the instruction of your father, And do not forsake the law of your

do this. The son is also instructed to learn from his mother. Since she has true wisdom, she can speak wisely as she instructs her children. This woman is a capable counterpart to her husband.

Other proverbs also speak of *torah*, divine “teaching, instruction,” taught by a mother to her son (1:8; 6:20). In Song 8:2, Solomon’s wife recalls how she had been taught by her mother. Prov 31:1–9 can be understood as a divine, prophetic revelation taught to Lemuel by his mother. “Scripture’s depiction of . . . roles of women often transcend overly narrow gender distinctions.”⁶³

Scripture repeatedly assures that Yahweh’s mercy endures forever,⁶⁴ pointing to God’s grace toward humans who cannot earn His mercy or kindness with their own goodness. And this is what is displayed by the Prov 31 Woman of Strength in “gospel-rich speech” portraying her mercy, wisdom, and strength—all of which reflects God Himself. There is also a NT comparison with Jesus, who was also known for His teaching. Even pagan soldiers were constrained to admit: “no man spake like this Man” (John 7:45–46).

Proverbs 31:27

“She watches over the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness.” The first phrase describes her vigilance over her household, with the initial participle “one who watches vigilantly over” (lit. “keep a lookout”). This links this to v. 26, reiterating that she ever keeps a sharp lookout over life. The first phrase can also mean, “All the affairs of her household are wisdom and/or instruction”—another summarization of her life of wisdom.

The second half of the verse once again asserts her unstinting diligence. The initial participle “one who watches vigilantly over” (lit. “keep a lookout”) reminds that she keeps a sharp lookout over the affairs of her household. Though she has servants, she assumes full responsibility for the instruction of her children and has full authority (see 1:8). “She keeps a close eye”—as does God. His careful eye includes even the sparrows!⁶⁵

Proverbs 31:28

“Her children rise up and call her blessed; Her husband also, and he praises her.” Her husband celebrates her wisdom (cf. vv. 28–29, 30–33). Waltke argues that he is like Adam who, with his first and only recorded words in

mother” (Prov. 1:8); “My son, keep your father’s command, And do not forsake the law of your mother” (6:20).

⁶³See “Women Teaching Women: The Shulammitte Teachers the Daughters of Jerusalem Just As Her Mother Had Taught Her” in Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Song of Songs*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 181–93.

⁶⁴Jer 33:1; Pss 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1–4, 29; 136:1–26; Ezra 3:11; 1 Chr 16:34, 41; 2 Chr 5:13; 7:3, 6; 20:21.

⁶⁵“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will” (Matt 10:29).

Genesis, celebrates his wife's equality with him: 'Bone of my bone; flesh of my flesh.'⁶⁶

The husband expresses his praise in the superlative: she is so exceptional that by comparison other women are plentiful—linking with the opening verse and her rarity mentioned there. The expression “to do valiantly,” (also repeated here) is used mainly in heroic warfare and triumphant victory as discussed above.

“Her children arise up”—they have been constant eye-witnesses of her thereby their testimony is all-important. Those who know her best announce this high praise. Outsiders can often misjudge the true situation in a family. This Woman of Strength is praised by all her family members. They even “call her blessed”—both for her own excellencies, and for the wisdom they have gathered from her. Her husband and children praise and bless her with similar sentiments that are elsewhere given to Yahweh.

Proverbs 31:30

“Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.” The shift from “you” back to “she” signals that the writer takes over from the husband. And “fearing the Lord” is seen as the foundation of her life.⁶⁷ Physical appearance has been mentioned but it does not overshadow the fundamental quality of “fearing the Lord.” This woman who otherwise does “*not fear*” (v. 21) “*fears the Lord*”—the pronoun “she” being emphatic. The preposition could also have a causal sense—she is to be rewarded “because of” what she has accomplished.

Praise at the city gates was the highest possible type in OT times because it would be announced by and/or to the town's leaders. This places the wife in equal status with her husband (v. 23).

Within the chiasmic structure of the passage, vv. 30 and 31 are the summary and conclusion. In fact, the entire book of Proverbs significantly closes with this passage—opening with the woman, Wisdom, and concluding with a Woman of Strength. Proverbs concludes extolling the Woman of Strength first by citing her household's praise of her (vv. 28–29) and then by community praise (vv. 30–31; cf. 27:2)—literally “and her deeds will praise her in the city gates.”

The eschatological promises about the good works of the saved are similar in Revelation: “Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and *their works follow them*’” (Rev 14:13, emphasis mine).

⁶⁶Waltke, *Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, 533.

⁶⁷One of the best-known expressions of Proverbs is “the fear of Yahweh.” It occurs repeatedly in Prov 1–9 (1:7, 29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10); in 10:1–22:16 (10:27; 14:26–27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4).

When Christ returns, He will publicly commend believers for their good works (ignoring their forgiven sins)—the redeemed acknowledging that all they have accomplished has been solely by His grace (Matt 25:31–40).

The conclusion of the last verses of Proverbs repeats the keyword “praise” (*hl*) in three of the four final verses (vv. 28, 30–31). Prov 31:10–31 commences with the blessings the Woman of Strength bestows on her husband and family, and concludes with the community praising her worth and her works. Her character and wisdom are praised publicly “in the gates.” This strong woman’s life brings her praise in her own right, and not merely as an appendage of her husband.

In v. 16, “the fruit of her hands” describes her work that enriches her household—in v. 31, that work and investment bring her praise. She “rises” (v. 15) to carry on her ceaseless industry for her household—now the city officials publicly “rise” (v. 28) to give her public honor in the ancient “city hall.”⁶⁸

As the passage concludes (the finale of the entire book of Proverbs) the underlying motive of the Woman of Strength is highlighted: “the fear of the Lord” (31:30). This connection of wisdom with the fear of the Lord (vv. 26a, 30b) echoes the beginning of Proverbs (1:7; 9:10), and also its center (15:33).

Prov 31:10–31’s praise of the strong woman is sometimes compared to Ps 111 praising Yahweh because of the verbal similarities in them:

1. Ps 111 begins with “Hallelu Yah” [“Praise the Lord”]. This is reflected in Prov 31:31 which says, “Her works bring her praise.”⁶⁹

2. Ps 111:2 speaks of God’s works; Prov 31:13 speaks of her works.

3. Ps 111:3 says that the Lord’s work is honorable (*hadar*; NIV “majestic”); Prov 31:25 ascribes strength and “dignity” (*hadar*) to the woman;

4. Ps 111:4 says that the Lord is gracious and full of compassion; Prov 31:26 ascribes the law of compassion to this woman.

5. Ps 111:5 says that the Lord gives “food” (*terep*); Prov 31:15 says that the woman provides “food” (*terep*) for her house.

6. Ps 111:10 says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom—which is a major motto of Proverbs; Prov 31:30 describes the woman as fearing the Lord.

7. Ps 111:10 says that the Lord’s praise will endure; Prov 31:31 says that the woman will be praised for her works.

It is apparent that the Woman of Strength in Prov 31 is created in the image of God and clearly displays it as obviously as her male counterparts.

⁶⁸McCreech, *Wisdom as Wife*, 36.

⁶⁹R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, 186.