

***Wisdom Incarnate?:
Identity and Role of אשת-חיל (“the Valiant Woman”)
in Proverbs 31:10–31***

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Understanding the identity of אשת-חיל (literally, “a woman of strength”) in Prov 31:10–31 presents various exegetical and interpretative issues. What is the rational way to look at the business woman’s characteristics? Should the life of the ancient successful woman which the Hebrew acrostic pragmatically portrays be recognised as speaking of social activities in ANE culture or should it be limited to religious virtues relevant to an Israelite community? Or perhaps, we can make an interpretive decision looking at it from both sides? Employing textual and literary approaches to find the persona of אשת-חיל (“woman of strength”), I argue that all the activities of the woman in the poem indicate the model of virtuous woman as well as of the mundane woman in a particular historical period and that אשת-חיל (“the valiant woman”) is used for a symbolic figure of personified Wisdom.

KEYWORDS: אשת-חיל (“the valiant woman”), Hebrew acrostic, hermeneutical model, personified Wisdom

INTRODUCTION

When believers in Jewish or Christian communities describe their desired image of a wife, both women and men generally appeal to אשת-חיל (“the valiant woman”) in Prov 31:10–31, as a model worthy of emulation. In this poem, she is portrayed as a husband’s perfect helper (Prov 31:11, 23) and as a diligent business woman (vv. 13–16, 17–19, 24). She is represented as a physically and spiritually influential woman in society as well as in her household (vv. 19–20). She is not simply a wife who promotes prosperity, but she is a moral woman who possesses a heart of wisdom and Torah (v. 26). Furthermore, her family respects

and praises her excellence to the public (vv. 28–29, 31). She is, in other words, the epitome of a self-sacrificial wife acting for the sake of her husband, household, and community.

However, does this female model which reflects the cultural proclivity of ANE society simply aim to display the image of the ideal wife? Although the nature of wisdom in the OT usually refers to “particular physical and intellectual skills” (Exod 31:3–6) including weaving, business, and management that she performs, the term חכמה (“wise”) is surely related to the divine transcendent wisdom (Prov 1:7; 3:7) as well as the lifestyle and the personal capacity to behave according to wise instructions.¹ Consequently, regardless of the genre and form of the text, the literal interpretation in which the woman probably is the ideal model of an excellent wife in every day society, might fail to notice the text’s deeper meaning. If so, how do Christian readers recognise אשת־חיל (“the valiant woman”) in the context of the whole book and of Prov 31:10–31 specifically? This question leads us to another important question: Are there different levels of hidden meaning of this female figure? Thus, the central issue in the interpretation of this poem is to scrutinise the persona of אשת־חיל (“the valiant woman”) within Proverbs and in related texts of the Hebrew Bible.

The song of אשת־חיל (“the valiant woman”) has a long history of interpretation in Jewish and Christian traditions;² from the start of the new historical criticism in the nineteenth century until the late 1970s, early biblical scholars (Hitzig, Toy, Stier, Delitzsch)³ regarded this poem as an appendix attached to Proverbs, separated from the wisdom poems or even regarded as a secular song. During the last three decades, however, many interpreters⁴ have been increasingly interested in the literary value of the text as an independent Hebrew poem, and have applied literary, structural, socioeconomic, or canonical interpretations to this poem in order to clarify the nature of the female imagery. Within

1. E. C. Lucas, “Wisdom Theology,” in *DOTWPW* (ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns; Nottingham, England: IVP, 2008), 902.

2. Albert M. Wolters divides the history of the interpretation before the year 1600 and after 1600 (*The Song of the Valiant Woman: Studies in the Interpretation of Proverbs 31:10–31* [Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster, 2000]).

3. There are exceptions to this entire trend before the 1980s. Wolters suggests four scholars: Arnold B. Ehrlich, Paul Joüon, Margaret B. Crook, and Edmond Jacob (Wolters, *Song*, 128–38).

4. Murray H. Lichtenstein, “Chiasm and Symmetry in Proverbs 31,” *CBQ* 44 (1982): 202–11; Thomas P. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31,” *RB* 92 (1985): 25–46; Wolters, *Song*; Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31* (BZAW 304; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001).

these new approaches, a rhetorical approach, developed by feminist scholars (Camp, Fontaine, Brenner, Schroer, etc) criticising the traditional patriarchal perspective indicated in this passage and arguing that אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) refers to Personified Wisdom, has influenced the modern historical-critical studies of this poem in which modern interpreters generally did not link אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) with personified Wisdom of Prov 1–9.⁵ Nonetheless, recent rhetorical and literary interpretations concerning this poem seem to distant themselves from a Yahwistic perspective. This sustained isolation from the religious reference arose from the LXX’s reading in Prov 31:30b which is different from the MT’s wording. Toy, for instance, presumably maintains that the later scribes of the MT substituted “a woman who fears Yahweh” for the LXX reading “the intelligent (συνετή) woman”, in order to insert religious meaning into the poem to unite the message of Proverbs:⁶

γυνή γὰρ συνετή εὐλογεῖται, φόβον δὲ κυρίου αὕτη αἰνεῖτω.
 (“For it is a intelligent woman that is blessed, let her praise the
 fear of the Lord.”)

אִשָּׁה יִרְאַת־יְהוָה הִיא תִתְהַלָּל
 (“The woman who fears Yahweh, she is to be praised.”)

5. Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (BLS 11; Sheffield: Almond, 1985); Carole R. Fontaine, “Proverbs,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 153–60; Athalya Brenner, “Proverbs 1–9: An F Voice?” in *On Gendering Texts Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen van Dijk Hemmes; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 113–30; Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible* (trans. Linda M. Mahoney and William McDonough; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000).

6. Crawford Howell Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 549; William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (London: SCM, 1970), 670; R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs: Based on the Revised Standard Version* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 186. Even though Toy disregards the phrase “God-fearing woman” out of the LXX’s rendering in v. 30b as redacted by later scribes, this reliance on the Septuagint translation is doubtful. Recent commentators rely more on the MT’s rendering. Bruce Waltke notes, “both the MT and the LXX contain “fear Yahweh”, the point at issue” (*The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 535. See the following references: R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 244; Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 280; Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31* (AB 18B; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 898.

However, the combination of φόβος (“fear”) and κυρίου (“lord”) is no more than a common syntagmatic device to express the theological foundation of Proverbs (1:7, 29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27, 29; 14:26; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17)⁷ and other renderings (Vg, Tg, Syr, Aq) support the phrase אִשָּׁה יִרְאַת־יְהוָה (“the woman who fears Yahweh”) of the MT as well. Nonetheless, until recently, the interpretation to recognise אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) as the embodiment of religious virtue, “fear of Yahweh,” has been rare. In this paper, in order to examine whether אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) embodies Wisdom which is personified in Prov 1–9, I will offer the textual, literary, and theological meaning of אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) in its relation both to the woman’s virtues in Prov 31:10–31 and to Lady Wisdom in the context of Proverbs.

INTERPRETATION OF אִשְׁת־חַיִל IN PROVERBS 31:10–31

The poem of אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) is organized as an alphabetic acrostic whose pattern is also found in other passages in Hebrew (Nah 1:2–8; Pss 9; 10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145; Lam 1–4; Sir 51:13–20) and in Ugaritic.⁸ This acrostic, in enclosing the entire book, is intended to offer the reader the impression that the description which the poem of אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) is treating is covered from every angle.⁹ In other words, by using the full acrostic form in Prov 31:10–31, the poet comes to emphasize the sense of wholeness in the portrayed images of the woman, although it could also be designed for memorising purposes by following its sequence.

Meaning and Interpretations of אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the Valiant Woman”)

In order to confirm the identity of אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) in this poem, an understanding of the textual and contextual meaning of the phrase is necessary. Why does the poet utilize the strong military term

7. Johann Cook, *The Septuagint of Proverbs: Jewish and/or Hellenistic Proverbs? Concerning the Hellenistic Colouring of LXX Proverbs* (SVT 69; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 62.

8. Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 191–2.

9. Norman Karol Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (Revised ed.; London: SCM, 1962), 32.

היל (“strength”; Exod 14:4; Judg 11:1; Ezek 17:17) to depict the woman? What does that imply in the present context? How is this term related to other verses? These are the central issues in this section.

The phrase אִשְׁת־הֵיל (literally, “a woman of strength”) in Prov 31:10 has been translated into various English expressions. At first, the Hebrew term הֵיל lexically means “capacity,” “power,” and “strength”; in Ugaritic “army,” “troops”; and in Arabic “horse,” “cavalry,” and “strength”.¹⁰ As with diverse meanings of הֵיל (“strength”), translations of אִשְׁת־הֵיל (“the valiant woman”) became varied. Traditionally, in a religious sense, the LXX renders this phrase as “a virtuous woman” (Γυναιῖα ἀνδρείαν).¹¹ Perdue and Camp translate this as “a woman of worth,” Clifford as “a capable wife” (NRSV), Toy as “a good wife,” and Brown as “a woman of excellence” (ESV). The rendering of the Vulgate’s version “a valiant woman” has been recently supported by scholars such as Waltke (“a valiant wife”), Murphy (“a woman of valor”), and Wolters (“the Valiant Woman,” so also Van Leeuwen); similarly, Fox translates this literally as “a woman of strength.”

These renderings reflect how interpreters perceive this woman: either an actual figure of reality or as the symbol of an abstract world. If she represents a real woman in the ancient world, this poem might be read in a specific historical context. All the images in the poem could mirror her married life and public activities in the sage’s social setting. Otherwise, if she appears as a symbolic figure, the poetic metaphors might be understood as portraying characteristics of personified Wisdom in Proverbs (1:20–33; 3:13–18; 4:1–9; 7:4–5; 8:1–9:6). These two extremes are associated with the purpose of this poem. Namely, is this poem purposefully designed to extol her heroic strength or to praise religious virtues? However, the two interpretations need not be considered as incompatible, i.e. the image of this woman can be included in two simultaneous dimensions.¹² On the one hand, she is a socioeconomic model of a phenomenal Hebrew wife and at the same time she has metaphorical features of personified Wisdom in Prov 1–9.

10. Robin Wakely, “הֵיל”, in *NIDOTTE vol.2* (ed. Willem VanGemeren; Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster, 1997), 116–26; In other references, הֵיל is often attributed to God himself (Pss 33:16, 59:12, 118:15; Deut 8:17) or is a gift of Yahweh (Ps 18:33, 40); “make them totter by your power” (Ps 59:12); A. Caquot, “ga’ar”, in *TDOT* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 2:355.

11. See W. O. E. Oesterley’s rendering and the NIV version, “a wife of noble character” (*The Book of Proverbs: With Introduction and Notes* [London: Methuen, 1929], 283).

12. McCreesh and Richard Clifford take this simultaneous view (Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* [OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999], 274; McCreesh, “Wisdom,” 92).

Socioeconomic Interpretation

The understanding of the socioeconomic background of this poem helps readers to recognise the woman as possessing spiritual and physical competence and to discover affinities with the way of life of ancient women. Yoder argues that “the Woman of Substance” in Prov 31:10–31 perfectly reflects a figure of a wealthy and upper-class Persian woman between the sixth and third centuries B.C.¹³ Since the sage developed this poem to enlighten the young in the socioeconomic context of Persian-period Palestinian women, “the sage’s personification of her may reflect the realities of women” in its context.¹⁴ However, the dating from the Persian period which underpins Yoder’s argument does not lead necessarily to the conclusion that the social background in Prov 31:10–31 is only identical with the women’s lifestyle of the period of the Achaemenid Empire. Fox argues against Yoder that the picture of a woman, as not being constrained by childbearing and household labours, but as being actively involved in social activities, reflects both the Hellenistic period and the postexilic period of Judea.¹⁵

As a recent socioeconomic reading, Lang finds a social context from Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* dating from fifth or fourth century Athens and points out that the Hebrew household’s labouring is compatible with that of the Athenians.¹⁶ He concludes that “the poem as a whole celebrates female efficiency, and not erotic attraction.”¹⁷ Although reading this poem in relation to Athenian culture could deepen the understanding of the text, this is not accurately matched with what the poem describes. Firstly, it is doubtful whether or not Israelite women were able to purchase land, as were Athenian wives in Xenophon. Secondly, in Prov 31:10–31, it is unlikely that the aim for marriage is simply economic, because אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) is a model of self-sacrifice for the sake of her husband and the entire household. The

13. Yoder, *Wisdom*, 71–2.

14. “His use of female figures, the metaphor of marriage, and the motif of the ‘Stranger’ Woman resonate with the ideological campaign against exogamous marriages to ‘foreign women’ waged by Ezra-Nehemiah” (Yoder, *Wisdom*, 102–10).

15. Fox presents another problem: “we do not know women like the one in this poem were allowed as great a scope in economic activity as were those in Elephantine” (Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 900–1).

16. Bernhard Lang, “Women’s Work, Household and Property in Two Mediterranean Societies: Comparative Essay on Proverbs xxxi 10–31,” *VT* 54 (2004): 197–8.

17. *Ibid.*, 207.

socioeconomic reading could shed great light in recognising the social customs and background of the text. The attempt to portray her as a mundane female model is worthwhile, but this approach lacks intratextual coherence with the entire message of Proverbs.

Ethical and Symbolic Interpretation

The plentiful amount of metaphorical language leads us to see אשת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) as a symbolic and ethical figure. Even though the socioeconomic reading of חַיִל (“strength”) could underline her cultural identity as an urban upper-class woman (Yoder) and as an active economic figure (Lang), this presentation throughout the poem implies that she has a remarkable morality and disposition, and further significantly presents her as a “virtuous woman.” All the activities which this poem undoubtedly describes are associated with genuine virtues: goodness to her husband (v. 12), delightful service (v. 13), diligence (vv. 15, 18, 27), compassion (v. 20), assurance (v. 21), self-dignity (vv. 22, 24), wisdom, loving-kindness (v. 26), and fear of Yahweh (v. 30).

The only occurrence of אשת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) outside the book of Proverbs is in the narrator’s description by Boaz in Ruth 3:11 (“you are a woman of strength”) after Ruth’s daring act (Ruth 3:7) according to Naomi’s instructions. Some might argue that the meaning of חַיִל (“strength”) here refers to fearless bravery or to an individual quality. However, there are two crucial pieces of evidence which show that it refers to a sort of noble character. Firstly, public opinion in Bethlehem indicates the positive reputation with regard to Ruth’s character: “all the people of the town know that you are a noble woman” (Ruth 3:11).¹⁸ This confirms her extraordinary loyalty and fidelity to Naomi’s household and Yahwism (cf. Ruth 1:16–17). Secondly, Ruth’s character corresponds to the narrator’s appraisal of Boaz (Ruth 2:1): אִישׁ גִּבּוֹר חַיִל (“a man mighty in strength”). He is portrayed as having a character similar to that of Ruth. He is not only a wealthy man in town, but also “one who possessed social standing and a good reputation” and “ability and honour.”¹⁹

Besides, in the public square, “the elders and all the people at the gate” invoke a blessing on Ruth which “Rachel and Leah who built up the house of Israel” received (Ruth 4:11). Likewise, the wife in this poem serves her household and husband (Prov 31:11–12, 15, 21, 27). The loyalty and fidelity of Ruth, who commits herself to building the family

18. Frederic Bush, *Ruth-Esther* (WBC 9; Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 173.

19. *Ibid.*, 100.

of Naomi, Boaz, and even Israel, are distinctively similar to the descriptions of both the woman (Prov 31:10–31) and Lady Wisdom, who built her whole house (Prov 9:1–6). In the book of Ruth and Prov 31:10–31, the description of אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) implies ethical qualities rather than social characteristics of the particular historical time.

Reflections

On the one hand, while the term חַיִל (“strength”) is used to refer to brave deeds of soldiers in a military context (cf. 1 Sam 14:48, 52), the woman is understood as a “valorous wife” in personality, wealth, leadership, and capacity. In the sense of the woman’s heroism, the rendering as a “valiant woman” on the surface level would be appropriate. On the other hand, this woman appears as a symbolic model for a virtuous woman beyond the reflection of social setting. The book of Proverbs aims to educate children to possess moral virtues such as “righteousness, justice, and equity” from their heart (Prov 1:3). William Brown, in particular, proposes that the ethical and moral perspectives of the wisdom corpus are connected in both the anthropocentric and theocentric frames. He argues that “the wisdom corpus of the OT, as well as much ANE Wisdom literature embraces . . . discourse to shape the contours of virtuous character.”²⁰ Therefore, the acrostic poem of אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”), in its use of poetic symbols and metaphors, describes not only characteristics of the skilful wife but also her virtues.

Literary Purpose in Proverbs 31:10–31

These two ways of interpreting the identity of אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) subsequently lead us to the question concerning the purpose of Prov 31:10–31. Why does the poet adopt this female figure at the end of this book? Whybray argues that, since what the acrostic describes is concerned with man’s perspective, this poem is “a handbook for prospective bridegrooms.”²¹ Crook understands this poem as a mother’s instruction or training booklet, in order to educate their daughters in a high ranked girls’ school.²² For this reason, Lyon argues that the female

20. William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 4, 19.

21. Whybray, *Proverbs*, 184.

22. Margaret B. Crook, “The Marriageable Maiden of Proverbs 31:10–31,” *JNES* 13 (1954): 137.

imageries of Prov 31:10–31 fit well into the premonarchic Israelite period according to socio-anthropological research, so much so that the poem is intended to reflect the social role of women in the period.²³ The final redactor of the book of Proverbs in the postexilic era employed the premonarchic female image into this acrostic in order to propose a valid female model to the community. Brenner notices the emergence of the female voice at the end of Proverbs, in contrast to the male voice through the mother's and father's instruction to the ordinary son in Prov 1–9 and to the royal son in Prov 31:1–9.²⁴

However, as we discuss this, it is obvious that the emphasis on this passage is not only on a marriage system and a desired model of a woman, but also on woman's virtues. The valiant woman, then, is transformed into an earthly example in order to rebuild her husband's home and society through her excellent virtues. The figure of אשת-חיל ("the valiant woman") as personified Wisdom of Yahweh who calls out his people and makes them seek Yahweh's Wisdom is given to the faith community of Israel. In this metaphor, she is given to them as Wisdom incarnate which bridges the heavenly realm with the earthly realm to delight in the cosmic order of creation and to be praised among his people (Prov 8:31).

אשת-חיל ("THE VALIANT WOMAN") AS PERSONIFIED WISDOM IN THE CONTEXT OF PROVERBS

If the woman is indeed the personification of wisdom, how does the poet apply the personification in Prov 31? By observing some literary techniques within the poem, it will be argued that אשת-חיל ("the valiant woman") is another form of personified Wisdom in the frame of the entire book of Proverbs (cf. Prov 1:20–33; 8:4–36; 9:1–6, 11).

Divine Characteristics of אשת-חיל

When it is argued that the feminine imagery in the poem has a similar metaphor with personified Wisdom, how does it reflect her divine attributes? The context of Prov 31:25–27 in particular makes a significant poetic allusion or echo with the personified Wisdom in Prov 8:

23. Ellen Louise Lyons, "A Note on Proverbs 31:10–31," in *Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy* (ed. Kenneth G. Hoglund, Elizabeth Huwiler, and J. T. Glass; Sheffield, England: JSOT), 237–45.

24. Brenner, "F Voice," 127–8.

Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness (ESV).

Schroer claims that אִשְׁת־הַיִּל (“the valiant woman”) in Prov 31 represents the personified Wisdom in Prov 1–9 and furthermore that Wisdom is “a counterpart for YHWH” and even “the God of Israel is the image of a woman and in the language of the goddesses.”²⁵ However, Schroer’s argument drawn from Prov 8 does not seem to have clear linguistic evidence to connect the female image with a deity or her divine origin. In Prov 8, Wisdom has a close relationship with Yahweh from the beginning of the world and participates in creation. Whybray examines mythological elements about the divine origin of wisdom as Yahweh’s associate in Prov 8:22–31 (cf. 3:19) and argues that expressions which are related to creation are not mythological, but metaphorical.²⁶ The nature of Wisdom in Prov 8 comes from Yahweh by whom it is personified as an attribute of Yahweh, not as independent hypostasis, in order to bridge “between the wisdom tradition and the main Israelite religious tradition.”²⁷ Weeks also proposes that the word אֲמֹן (“craftsman”) in Prov 8:30a as a noun or adjective refers to people “who are faithful to God,” and it might be selected “to reflect such specific religious connotations.”²⁸ Accordingly, there is little distinctive evidence for arguing that personified Wisdom is a hypostasis or a deity. In Prov 1–9, personified Wisdom is no more than one of Yahweh’s natures.

Significantly, metaphoric similarities between personified Wisdom and אִשְׁת־הַיִּל (“the valiant woman”) instead raise a question. If Yahweh’s Wisdom in Proverbs in a striking way is necessarily to be

25. Schroer maintains that “the central text Prov 8:22–31, in order to speak of Wisdom’s divine sovereignty also borrow from Egyptian myths and Egyptian as well as Syrian goddess-iconography” (*House*, 28).

26. According to R. N. Whybray, four distinctive words— קָנִי (“he created, possessed, brought forth,” v.22), נִסְכָּחִי (“I was woven, formed,” v.23), הוּלַלְתִּי (“I was brought forth, was born,” vv. 24, 25), אֲמֹן (“artisan, workman, master craftsman,” v. 30) — do not speak of the origin of Wisdom before the beginning of creation and do not indicate that she was actively involved in creation as a divine being (*Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9* [SBT 45; Naperville, IL: A. R. Allenson, 1965], 98–104).

27. *Ibid.*, 103–4.

28. See his translation; Stuart Weeks, “The Context and Meaning of Proverbs 8:30a,” *JBL* 125 (2006): 441–2.

incarnated in the worldly sphere, how does the author create her appearance? For this question, the chiasmic parallelism in Prov 8:30b–31 hints at a shift from the cosmological dimension of Wisdom to an anthropological dimension. Wisdom was to accompany Yahweh during creation, celebrating His world before Him (Prov 8:30). Then, the camera angle of the poet is transferred into the dwelling place of humanity in v. 31 from the heavenly realm in Prov 8:22–30. Waltke notes, “she is at home with both God and humanity,” to whom Wisdom appealed beside the city gate.²⁹ After she has delighted in both Yahweh’s cosmos as personified Wisdom and people as the Wisdom of humanity, the poet transfers her persona to a human mother (“Sons, listen to me”; Prov 8:32), in order to call out to the wise and the foolish and lead them into her house (Prov 8:32–36). This metaphoric transition is likewise applied in the poem of אשת־הייל (“the valiant woman”). Namely, this woman typifies the personified Wisdom in an anthropological picture.

I was his delight (שׁעֵשׂוּת) day after day,
 rejoicing (מִשְׁחֻקָּה) before him always,
 rejoicing (מִשְׁחֻקָּה) in his inhabited world (בְּתוֹבָל)
 and my delight (וְשׁעֵשׂוּתִי) was in the children of man (אֶת־בְּנֵי אָדָם)
 (Prov 8:30b–31; ESV)

This personification of Wisdom playing on the earth (8:31) is paradigmatically linked to every action and virtue in אשת־הייל (“the valiant woman”) who lives in an ancient Hebrew household. Especially, in Prov 31:25–31, her virtues are associated not only with the virtues of Lady Wisdom, but also with the divine attributes. The woman’s characteristics are similar to those of personified Wisdom in Prov 1–9 and in particular, the nature of Wisdom is experienced in the down-to-earth daily life of the woman. In the following section, these divine virtues of אשת־הייל (“the valiant woman”) will be presented.

First of all, the clothing, “strength and majesty” (עֲזִיּוּהָדָר), which she is wearing in v. 25a, provides evidence that אשת־הייל (“the valiant woman”) has divine qualities. While protecting her household from the cold by dressing them in luxurious scarlet (שָׁנִים; v. 21b), she puts on both “imported Egyptian linen” (שֵׁשׁ, 22b) and garments “dyed in Phoenician red-purple” (וְאֶרְגָּמָן, v.22b). These are associated with wealth, royalty, and even further the tabernacle (1 Chr 15:27; Isa 3:23; Songs 3:10; Luke

29. Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 422.

16:19).³⁰ According to Whybray, colour metaphorically presents character.³¹ Clothes which she wears represent her virtues, as well as her social stature.³²

The meaning in “strength and majesty” is beyond the literal and socioeconomic perspective. These two words are associated with Yahweh’s presence and his dwelling place in the tabernacle (cf. Ps 96:6, “Glory and majesty [הדר] are before Him; strength [עז] and beauty are in His sanctuary”). The Chronicler in the climactic worship of God adapts this combination, “strength” and “majesty,” which symbolises the ark of Yahweh (1 Chr 16:27; Ps 96:6). “Strength” (כח) and “majesty” (הדר) are representative characters transcending generations of both the youth and the aged in Prov 20:29. Moreover, majesty is identified with “clothing” (לבש) Yahweh (Job 40:10; Ps 104:1; cf. 93:1).

Next, her laughing (שחק) at the “future days” (ליום אחרון) connotes her confidence without fear of the future (v. 25b). Contrary to customary optimistic usage of “laughing,” it could imply “a hostile connotation of derision and ridicule” in “the pitiful descriptions” of the attitude of “personal or national enemies of sufferers” and is used by God as a “means to accomplish his purposes (Ps 2:4; 59:8; Prov 1:26; Jer 20:7; Job 12:4).”³³ (Either quote fully in block quote or put in your own words). Her comprehensive preparation for the coming future enables her to prevent the disastrous circumstances which would have been suffered by her household.

More importantly, her clothing (v. 25a) provides comfort for her in the future as a replacement for fear. On account of her garments (vv. 21b, 25a), she has neither fear nor worry; instead she fills the future with pleasure: this statement, “she laughs at future days” (v. 25b), makes a parallelism with “she does not fear for her household on account of snow” (v. 21a).³⁴ Personified Wisdom warns of disasters and judgment which fall to those who disregard her instructions and who deny fear of Yahweh (Prov 1:26–31). She rejoices in looking at the uncertain future as a

30. Christine Yoder argues that “scarlet, red-purple, and linen textiles are stuffs of the tabernacles, the house of the royal divine king” (“The Woman of Substance (אשת־היל): A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10–31,” JBL 122 (2003): 85.

31. Whybray, *Proverbs*, 429.

32. Toy, *Proverbs*, 547.

33. Leslie C. Allen, “שחק,” in *NIDOTTE* (ed. Willem VanGemeren; Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1997), 3:1228–30.

34. Concerning the collocation of laughing and no fear, see Job 5:22; Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Proverbs,” in *NIB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 5:262.

prophet or as a conquerer over her adversaries. This delight is also found in the creative activities of Lady Wisdom with God (8:30–31).

Thirdly, she begins to speak of “wisdom and loving-kindness teaching” (בהכמה ותורת-חסד) in Prov 31:26. This verse can be shown in socioeconomic perspective regardless of her divine attributes. Yoder highlights the earthly image of the woman which will bring the material benefits of wisdom like “silver” (cf. 2:4; 16:16).³⁵ The emergence of sapiential terms culminates in the divine nature of the woman by indicating that the essence of wisdom belongs to this woman. The ambiguous genitival construct of ותורת-חסד (“and loving-kindness teaching”) could be interpreted in various ways; it can be an objective genitive (“one which teaches loving-kindness”), an attributive genitive (“loving Torah”), a genitive of species (“the law-kindness”), or a genitive of agency (“loving-kindness which she gives Torah”).³⁶ In Prov 31:26b, the attributive genitive to modify “Torah” is more fitting to connote the woman’s teaching shaped by the virtue of loving-kindness (חסד).³⁷

Instructions on her tongue are not so much the wisdom which calls forth wealth, as sacred words of godly wisdom in Prov 31:30. The affluence of wisdom and loving-teaching coming from her mouth implies that she has already possessed wisdom and Torah.³⁸ The expression “she opens her mouth” recalls the teachings of King Lemuel’s mother with regard to the righteousness and rights of the oppressors (Prov 31:8–9).³⁹ When she has the heart of wisdom and does not forsake loving-kindness, she can exert her wisdom to her household and to the community (3:3). Here she is typified as a teacher filled with wisdom.

Wordplay of Sophia

Fourthly, there are two striking wordplays in Prov 31:27. The woman who “watches over the affairs of her household” in the first colon gives prominence to careful watching for possible threats. The valiant woman in previous verses is the self-sacrificing wife devoted to her husband and

35. Yoder, *Wisdom*, 89.

36. This phrase occurs only here in the Old Testament (Bruce K. Waltke, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 141–54).

37. Similar rendering with this also appears in Mal 2:6 (“true instruction”) (Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 513). See also Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 897; Murphy, *Proverbs*, 248.

38. Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 532.

39. Van Leeuwen, “Proverbs,” 262.

to the household's industry. On the other hand, here she becomes an overseer managing her servants as well as a mother taking care of her children. With this interpretation, the pun in v. 27 receives a totally different connotation.

The usage of the irregular participial verb צופיה ("watching") in v. 27a is unexpected and has caused interpretative debates because the poem entirely uses perfect or imperfect verbal forms in describing the extraordinary works of the woman. Wolters argues that the "hymnic participle" צופיה ("watching") refers to the personified Wisdom, functioning as a bilingual wordplay with the Greek word *sophia*.⁴⁰ If it does, the phrase "she watches over affairs of her household" (צופיה הליכות) (ביתה) in v. 27a can be translated into "Wisdom (*Sophia*) is her household's affairs (ways)". Unlike other perfect or imperfect verbs in vv. 10–26 used to praise the actions and virtues of the woman, the initial verb is not the imperfect verbal form (יצר, "she watches"), so that this participle could provide certain evidence of intentional rearrangement, in order to symbolize personified Wisdom. Through the use of wordplay, this implies that אשת-היל ("the valiant woman") refers to Lady Wisdom. All the business and activities done in the family and the community of Wisdom are embodied in this valiant woman. However, the ambiguous translation "the ways (הליכות) of her house are *Sophia*, generates controversial issues. Fox criticizes Wolters's claim and maintains that this rendering does not make sense, "for 'the ways of her house' are what the members of the household do, and it is not these actions."⁴¹ The feminine noun הליכות ("walkings") and the nominal form ("walking") of the verb הלך ("to walk") refer to "path, caravan, procession, and affair." This is the only case where the noun הליכות ("walkings") occurs in the book of Proverbs, while the noun דרך ("way") is usually used throughout the book.

In Prov 9:1–6, Lady Wisdom builds her complete house and sends out her maidservants to invite her visitors and encourages people in "walking in the way of the insight (ואשרו בדרך בינה)" (Prov 9:6b). Wisdom becomes the divine way to enter into the world of personified Wisdom, in order to gain fear of Yahweh, the knowledge of the Holy One, and to find life (Prov 9:10–11). Thus, *Sophia* (Wisdom) in Prov 31:27 becomes the way which all the members in her household should follow and obey to obtain divine attributes and benefits.

40. Based on this ambiguity in its expression, this poem presents "a very practical and down-to-earth ideal of God-fearing wisdom which stands in vivid contrast to intellectual ideal of wisdom favored by Hellenism" (Wolters, "Sôpiyyâ," 586).

41. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 897.

Wordplay of Idleness

The negative statement, “she does not eat the bread of idleness,” in Prov 31:27b makes a synonymous parallel with “she watches over the affairs of her household.” The idiomatic expression *ולחם עצלות* (“bread of idleness”) is the metonymy of benefits gained by sluggishness and the totality of idleness (cf. Prov 20:17: “food gained by fraud”). However, “idleness” can be a subject in a “concrete sense of idlers,” so that in connection with the subject *Sophia*, v. 27b can be translated as “idleness will not eat bread.”⁴² This rendering, of course, does not make grammatical sense, but the ambiguity of interpretation leaves other possible readings.

The foolish son (Prov 19:13; 10:5) who comes to shame and destruction is portrayed by bringing out depravity by his laziness: “laziness casts into a deep sleep” (Prov 19:15). What is provided is not the bread of wisdom with which Lady Wisdom provides her guests (Prov 9:5), but the false food (“hidden bread”) with which the woman “Folly” beguiles the youth (Prov 9:17; cf. 7:5). Wisdom provides the food which leads to life, while the bread of laziness which represents illicit gratification of all greed draws near to the place of destruction (Prov 9). Poetic ambiguity in vv. 25–27 strengthens the metaphoric and symbolic character of *אשת־הייל* (“the valiant woman”).

Over all, in various metaphoric expressions and word-plays, *אשת־הייל* (“the valiant woman”) successfully is personified in the characteristics of Lady Wisdom. Such a personification of Wisdom is also found in the Wisdom of Ben Sira which finishes with an acrostic (Sir 51:13–30), an autobiographical section (51:13–30) and echoes the pursuit of Wisdom as seeking a bride (51:13–30; cf. 14:20–7; Wis 8:1–18).

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF *אשת־הייל* (“THE VALIANT WOMAN”)

If in the acrostic form, *אשת־הייל* (“the valiant woman”) personifies Wisdom in Prov 1–9, what are the theological implications?

Sacred and Secular Model

At first, indications from wordplays (Prov 31:27) and the appositional relation (“the woman, the fear of Yahweh”; Prov 31:30b) suggest that personified Wisdom is incarnated in the metaphoric figure of *אשת־הייל*

42. Wolters, “Sôpiyyâ,” 583.

(“the valiant woman”). In particular, the religious virtue in Prov 31:30b specifies that the woman has an individual relationship with God, while she is described as one being excellent at her household business and in her social activities in vv. 11–24. As we observed above, the inconsistency between the woman’s mundane activities and her sacred virtue, however, has caused interpretive confusion in determining the identity of this woman.

So then, how can we reconcile the discrepancy between these two extremes? In this regard, Wolters argues that the interpreter’s worldview with regard to “nature” (or worldly realm) and “grace” (or spiritual realm) can make a difference in the exegesis of Prov 31:10–31, thus emphasizing the harmony between the secular and spiritual.⁴³ Also, although the understanding of the “fear of Yahweh” in this book varies,⁴⁴ the fear of Yahweh is explicitly presented as (1) a prime religious virtue calling for a genuine relationship with God and (2) as the main principle of the lifestyle of the wise (Prov 2:5; 3:5–7; 8:13; 9:10). Crenshaw maintains that this religious virtue or awe “consists of the ancient covenantal obligations and no genuine conflict exists between wisdom and sacred history.”⁴⁵ The beginning of wisdom moreover is frequently compatible with the “fear of Yahweh” and forms an *inclusio* in the entire book (Prov 1:7, cf. 9:10; 15:33). Recent rhetorical and literary criticism tends to refute the dichotomous separation between the religious and non-religious, primarily witnessed in allegorising and secularising the poem.

43. According to Wolters, there are four conceptions about the relation between grace and nature: (1) a radical separation between two in the Anabaptist tradition, (2) a complementary relation to nature in the classical Roman Catholicism, (3) a detachable relation between the two in Lutheranism, (4) a restoring relation by grace in Calvinistic tradition. Wolters follows Calvinistic perspective, but the Catholic view concerning a “nature/supra-nature” is also helpful to understand the relationship: grace perfects and culminates the natural order. By this paradigm, the woman’s secular virtues and activities are subordinate to the “fear of the LORD” (*The Song of the Valiant Woman: Studies in the Interpretation of Proverbs 31:10–31* (Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster, 2000), 15–29. For the Catholic view, refer to Thomas Aquinas, *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas* (trans. A. M. Fairweather; LCC 11; London: SCM, 1954), 137–45.

44. The fear of God (or Yahweh) can be the sense of piety, the emotional awe in the presence of God, the horror for God’s retribution, right attitude to God, or covenantal duty or relationship. See Murphy, *Proverbs*, 254–8; Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 100–1; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 69–71.

45. James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (3rd ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 85.

Taking into account the structure of Prov 31, the thematic shift from individual and domestic virtues to divine virtues comes to an end both in praise of the woman (Prov 31:28–29, 31) and in her central characteristic—“fear of Yahweh” (Prov 31:30). As the public praises the outcomes of her works (“the fruit of her hands”; v. 31) and her achievements become her praise, the ordinary realm merges together with the spiritual realm. The fear of Yahweh is not separated from the mundane things of life, but becomes the source of all the virtues described in the poem. The fear of Yahweh pervades the activities of her life and even saturates the mundane activities as godly virtues. Wolters argues that “the woman’s household activities are seen not as something opposed to, or even distinct from, her fear of the Lord, but rather as their *external manifestation*.”⁴⁶ In everyday life, the spiritual sphere guides followers to the way of wisdom and the transcendent understanding of God. Indeed, “the fear of Yahweh” is the root of wisdom, loving-kindness, and all the pertinent virtues (Prov 31:26). Delitzsch states that this poem “refers all these, her virtues and her prudence, to the fear of God as their root.”⁴⁷ The source of various virtues in the woman’s lifestyle is thus epitomised in fearing Yahweh.

She is a mysterious and unsearchable being (Prov 31:10a) and a symbolic figure which represents the “fear of Yahweh” (Prov 31:30b). All the while she is an earthly housewife, mother, and businesswoman who is well acquainted with humanity and who is accessible to those who seek her. Two ambivalent characters—one a mundane woman in the secular realm and the other a devout woman in the sacred realm—are most properly balanced in this poem.

House-Building Metaphor

Secondly, the world of Lady Wisdom in Prov 8:22–31 is epitomised in the anthropological description with regard to the household system which the poem of אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) shows.⁴⁸ It may be

46. Wolters, *Song*, 25.

47. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon*. vol. 2 (trans. M.G. Eaton; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1875), 326. For the similar pietistic interpretation, see Clifford, *Proverbs*, 277; Van Leeuwen, “Proverbs,” 264; Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 536; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 898–9.

48. I use the paradigm of creation as the central theme of Wisdom literature from Perdue and Van Leeuwen. Both agree that the cosmos is a metaphoric form of house in Prov 1–9; 31 (Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1994]; Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Liminality and Worldview in Proverbs 1–9,” *Semeia* 50 (1990): 111–44; idem, “Building God’s House: An

hard to explain how the anthropological background in ancient times influenced this poem. The reason is that the dating of this acrostic poem is not entirely straightforward, since it is very difficult to affirm a specific period from its description of its social background. The socioeconomic readings, both of Yoder, who assigns this to the Persian period and of Lang, who dates it to fourth-century B.C. Athens, are thus, no more than guesses. However, it is significant to recognise that the poem portrays the Israelite household as a foundational unit in ANE society. Perdue proposes four characteristics of the Israelite household as “the central social institution in Israel”:

- (1) Rural and agrarian;
- (2) Economic institutions;
- (3) Strong ethical concept of solidarity deriving from the interdependence of household members;
- (4) The religious emphasis on God as Creator “of the cosmos and of the family and individual person.”⁴⁹

In another reference, Perdue argues that “the household not only grounded Old Testament theology in Israel’s social reality but also became the primary lens . . . to view the character and activity of God.”⁵⁰ The poem adopts the household metaphor to describe the lifestyle of a strong woman as a wife, a mother, a neighbour and a teacher in ancient Israelite society. This household metaphor lays an anthropological foundation in which the virtues of this woman are personified in building her household and in providing the household and outsiders with what they need, such as provisions, protection, and wisdom. Concerning this house metaphor, there are two intertextual links with the imagery between אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) and Lady Wisdom in Proverbs.

The house which Lady Wisdom builds shapes thematic patterns between personified Wisdom (Prov 9:1, 14; cf. 14:11, 15:25, 24:3) and

Exploration in Wisdom,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke* (ed. J. I. Packer and Sven Soderlund; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 204–11; idem, “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel,” in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (ed. Richard J. Clifford; SBL Symposium Series 36; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 67–90.

49. Perdue, *Proverbs*, 275–6; idem, “The Household, Old Testament Theology, and Contemporary Hermeneutics”, in *Families in Ancient Israel* (ed. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol L. Meyers; The Family, Religion, and Culture; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 223–57.

50. *Ibid.*, 225.

the woman in Prov 31. Perdue argues that the imagery of building a house is associated with Wisdom's actions and serves for a cosmological symbolism as contrasting with the Lady Folly who competes with Lady Wisdom (Prov 9:13–18).⁵¹ It is remarkable that this building metaphor in Prov 9 corresponds to Yahweh's creation of the universe. Van Leeuwen notes: "It is into God's cosmic 'house' that Wisdom, as the Lord's agent in creation, invites the simple . . . this interplay of creation and 'house' was a key to understanding the relationship of Prov 8."⁵²

As Wisdom becomes an agent of creation with Yahweh in Prov 8:22–31 and Prov 9:1–6, אִשְׁת־חַיִל ("the valiant woman") appears as a house-builder. As Lady Wisdom builds her house with security, wise instruction, and understanding, אִשְׁת־חַיִל ("the valiant woman") fills her house with clothing as well. Thus, the metaphor of house-building is another example indicating the personification of Wisdom. In the broad context of the OT, this house-building theme is found in the construction of the tabernacle and the temple associated with the work of creation and is a primary metaphor used by ANE societies.⁵³ Levenson argues that the event of cosmogony in Gen 1:1–2:3 is associated with building God's houses such as the erection of the tabernacle in Exodus and Solomon's temple building in 1 Kgs 6–7.⁵⁴ In the following sections, I will offer two intertextual patterns from the OT—tabernacle and temple.

Building the Tabernacle

First, the house-building theme outside the wisdom literature is well presented in the construction of the tabernacle. In the end of Yahweh's instructions to build the tabernacle as a medium of Yahweh's presence, Bezalel is designated as a representative craftsman of God's house and is noticed as endowed by an infilling of the Spirit of God and with "wisdom" (חכמה), "understanding" (תבונה), "knowledge" (דעת) and "all craftsmanship" (Exod 31:1–3; 35:31). The fact that the Pentateuch places significance on wisdom's role in the whole process of building the tabernacle is reflected in the frequency (five times) with which the word

51. Perdue, *Proverbs*, 150–1.

52. Van Leeuwen, "Building," 208.

53. The purpose of house building metaphor according to Van Leeuwen is "to express their respective views of human wisdom as rooted in divine wisdom manifest in the ordering and provisioning of the cosmos" ("Cosmos", 89).

54. See Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 78–99.

“wisdom” occurs in Exod 31 and 35, compared to the ten occurrences in the Pentateuch. God’s wisdom (כל־חכמי־לב; “all the wise of heart”) is granted to artisans who serve for making the priests’ vestments (Exod 28:3), Oholiab and all other assistants (Exod 31:6), and all the craftsmen who are called to fulfill the construction of the sanctuary (Exod 35:26, 31, 35; 36:1, 2; cf. Deut 4:6; 34:9). Wisdom and discernment, given to Bezalel, co-workers, and skilled men and women, ultimately aim to manufacture Israel’s most sacred house in which Yahweh and His glory will dwell.

Building the Temple of God

Secondly, the building of the temple by Solomon in 1 Kgs 4–7 has important thematic similarities to the house-building metaphor. Brueggemann maintains that the temple in ANE has two symbolic meanings: namely, “it provides assurances of reliable *cosmic order* and consolidates and legitimates concrete *political power*.”⁵⁵ With regard to cosmic order in the wisdom literature, the link between creation and the temple implies that the temple, amid chaotic disorder, establishes the “cosmic order” and stability (Ps 46).⁵⁶ Solomon’s temple building also has similarities both with the work of creation (Ps 78:69; Prov 9:1–6; 14:1; 24:3–4), and with the tabernacle’s construction (Exod 31:1–3). In addition, Van Leeuwen attempts to explain the construction of Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 5:7, 12; 7:13–14) in correlation with the motif of the building of God’s house (Prov 3:19–20), of creation (Ps 78:69) and of tabernacle.⁵⁷ In other words, while creation is a universal place where God dwells among human beings, the temple is a local place where God’s glory appears (Exod 40:34–35; 1 Kgs 8:10–11; cf 2 Chr 7:1–2).

Reflections

The genre of the book of Proverbs is classified as proverb (or parable,

55. Walter Brueggemann, *Solomon: Israel’s Ironic Icon of Human Achievement* (SPOT; Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 87.

56. *Ibid.*, 87–8.

57. Van Leeuwen, “Building,” 204–11.

משל) and consists of wise teachings and lessons in the form of epigrams (מליצה), words of the wise (דברי חכמים), and riddles (or enigmas, חידתם; Prov 1:6). While a few proverbs and numerical sayings have obscure senses, most of the sayings provide clear meanings to readers and are less enigmatic. Nonetheless, the usage of symbolic figures such as “the strange woman,” “Wisdom,” “Lady Wisdom,” and “Lady Folly” frequently makes understanding the meanings of the wisdom proverbs difficult. These proverbs typically stimulate readers’ imagination in ambiguous poetic semantics and require parallel understanding in comparing with other related proverbs.⁵⁸ In response to the question, “are there enigmas in Proverbs?” Fox notes, citing Crenshaw’s article: “An enigma deliberately blocks immediate understanding by ambiguities before allowing the audience to push through to a deeper understanding.”⁵⁹ In particular, as the acrostic in Prov 31:10–31 produces ambiguity for the persona of the woman and facilitates interpretive imagination when sketching her identity and deciphering its enigma, this does however enable readers to acquire deeper understanding and greater knowledge.

The interpretation of the poem of אשת־הייל (“the valiant woman”) may require such a hermeneutical imaging of Wisdom from the textual, historical understanding through the symbolic, ethical understanding. Just as the female imagery in Prov 31 and 1–9 forms the hermeneutical framework to interpret the enigmas properly in Prov 10–30, the woman’s activities in the acrostic have to be comprehended in the nature of personified Wisdom. This creativity is an essential key to understanding the persona of אשת־הייל (“the valiant woman”). When reading the female metaphor of Wisdom personified in Prov 1–9, we must necessarily ask a question: “if Lady Wisdom becomes incarnated, what might she look like?” The answer cannot of course be given in a fixed and mechanical approach, but has to use the associated images which are given in concrete descriptions of אשת־הייל (“the valiant woman”) in Prov 31:10–31. This does not mean denying the socioeconomic reading of the text, but proposing an imaginative and metaphoric reading of the text.

58. Ryan O’Dowd recognizes, referring to Ricoeur and Gadamar, that in explanation and understanding, “the very cross-disciplinary ambition ... appeals to creativity and the imagination in order to reconstruct the unknowns of the hermeneutical progress of understanding” (“Wisdom as Canonical Imagination”, in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, et al.; SHS 7; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 380; Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011).

59. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 65; James L. Crenshaw, “Impossible Questions, Sayings, and Tasks,” *Semeia* 17 (1980): 22.

CONCLUSION

אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) is a metaphorical figure as the earthly incarnation of Lady Wisdom as well as a model of the ancient extraordinary wife, an object of reverence. The poetic expressions describe her individual, family, communal, and divine virtues in the complete form of the Hebrew acrostic. Secondly, the religious virtue, which is the root of all other virtues throughout the poem, is not isolated from the secular realm and the woman’s social activities. This proposal is evidenced in poetic expressions of her virtues and the Greek worldplay of *Sophia*. Thirdly, the anthropological activity of the ancient woman can be related to the cosmological dimension of Wisdom personified in Prov 8.

Throughout the acrostic, she is the object to be praised in public, and the ultimate model to imitate in her extraordinary and religious virtues. She is an excellent model for a good wife, mother, manager, and neighbour, and most of all, she reflects the godly image of Yahweh whom Israelites were to fear. On the other side, אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”) is proposed as Wisdom incarnate on earth, whom the original readers were to earnestly aspire to marry, to search for, to seek out, and to acquire. The pedagogic purpose for which the book of Proverbs is designed is to discipline devout sons and daughters of Israel and teach them how to encounter incarnated Wisdom, אִשְׁת־חַיִל (“the valiant woman”), to live with her and to build their home under her supervision.