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## The Proverbs 31 Woman, Then

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## The Proverbs 31 Woman, Then

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

Before she became a cultural icon of Christian womanhood, before she was invoked in funeral eulogies, and even before she was recounted by Jewish husbands to their wives on the Sabbath, the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 represented an elite masculine perspective among the *golah* community centered in Jerusalem during the Persian period. The following paragraphs seek to offer the reader a glimpse into how Proverbs 31:10-31 reflects this historical context. In particular, the poem relies on economic activities and values of elite women and households then, which may be foreign to today's readers in the United States.

such was the case with Hakim Beg, the Qosh-Begi of Amīr Nasrallāh Bahādur (r. 1827-1860), who was often referred to by the inhabitants of Bukhara as “a Qizal Bash slave, and not a real Uzbek” due to his favorable attitude regarding trade with Persia and the support he gave to the city’s merchants who handled such trade.<sup>34</sup>

The last narrative we will consider is that of the renowned scholar Arminius Vambery, who in the early 1860s travelled throughout Anatolia, Persia, and Central Asia disguised as a dervish, or Sufi mystic. Vambery first encountered Shī’ī slaves on Bukharan soil as he was near to death from thirst, having traversed the desert en route from Khiva to Bukhara. Having fallen asleep and, by his own account, expecting soon to die, Vambery awoke surrounded by a group of Persian slaves, shepherds who, although having next to nothing themselves, nursed the author and his companions back to health. Vambery tells us a rather poignant story of one of their number, a five-year-old child:

He had been, two years before, captured and sold with his father. When I questioned him about the latter, he answered me confidently. ‘Yes; my father has bought himself (meaning paid his own ransom); at longest I shall only be a slave two years, for by that time my father will have spared the necessary money.’ The poor child had on him hardly anything but a few rags, to cover his weak little body; his skin was the hardness and colour of leather.<sup>35</sup>

One can scarcely imagine the hardship this child likely endured, or the heartbreak of his father who was compelled to leave without his son, and of his mother who may well have died without knowing her son’s fate. Of course, his character does not resurface at some later point in Vambery’s narrative; his story, like those of most Shī’ī slaves who lived and died in the Emirate of Bukhara in the nineteenth century, is lost to history.

Herein we have briefly considered four travel narratives which provide information relating to the history of the enslavement of Shī’ī Muslims in the Emirate of Bukhara in the nineteenth century. The sources examined confirm that the institution of slavery was ideologically rationalized and sanctified in accordance with sectarian prejudices harbored by Sunnī Muslims towards the Shī’ī Muslims in Mavarannahr. While this essay has shed light on the history of slavery in Islamic Central Asia, further investigation of this subject is warranted, both to expand our knowledge of the history of slavery in Central Asia and to bring this history fully into the broader narrative of the history of human bondage. Additionally, this highlights the persistence of the sectarian divide that has existed in Islam between the Sunnī and the Shī’a since the seventh century, a divide that a very small minority of extremists within the global Muslim community – both Sunnī and Shī’ī – have exploited and continue to exploit in order to justify oppression and violence.

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### *The Proverbs 31 Woman, Then*

Before she became a cultural icon of Christian womanhood, before she was invoked in funeral eulogies, and even before she was recounted by Jewish husbands to their wives on the Sabbath, the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 represented an elite masculine perspective among the *golah* community

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>35</sup> Arminius Vambery, *Travels in Central Asia: Being the Account of a Journey from Teheran across the Turkoman Desert on the Eastern Shore of the Caspian to Khiva, Bokhara, and Samarcand; Performed in the year 1863* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1865): 198.

centered in Jerusalem during the Persian period.<sup>36</sup> The following paragraphs seek to offer the reader a glimpse into how Proverbs 31:10-31 reflects this historical context. In particular, the poem relies on economic activities and values of elite women and households then, which may be foreign to today's readers in the United States.

Proverbs 31:10 begins with a question: "A woman of *ḥayil* who can find? Her price is far above jewels." The romantic view of marriage that predominates in United States culture would be foreign to the Persian period concept of marriage informing Proverbs 31:10-31. Marriage then is better understood as an economic, or political, transaction between families. Among elite families, one would expect that a bride brought financial resources to the marriage, in the form of a dowry provided by her family as well as other assets. While the assets belong to the bride, the husband as guardian would have access to them. Thus, the worth of a bride is an economic value: the husband would expect to benefit financially from her economic value.<sup>37</sup>

Another issue the English-language reader of today faces is how to translate the word *ḥayil*. In classical Hebrew, the term had numerous options: substance; strength; an army; wealth, property, and profit from trade; and bravery.<sup>38</sup> Yet, when translators treat the word for the woman of the poem, there is a tendency to choose something like, as in the New Revised Standard Version: "capable." It is not unimportant that the woman is described with a Hebrew term that reflects both heroic valor and wealth. Throughout the poem, she is identified with warrior phrases and economic activities.<sup>39</sup> She is described as a hero typical of the aristocracy.<sup>40</sup>

For those who view marriage in terms of an intimate sexual relationship, it might be surprising to observe that sexual fidelity is not the primary concern when the women's trustworthiness is mentioned and when the terms good and evil are deployed.<sup>41</sup> The husband and wife relationship described in verses 11 and 12 concerns the woman's role in the management and economic activities of the household. She is trustworthy to oversee the booty or plunder (v. 11).<sup>42</sup> "To render good not evil" (v.12) is an idiom that is best understood in a commercial sense.<sup>43</sup> The husband is not mentioned again until verse 23, when the poem places him at the site of manly power: the city gates. Her husband's respected public status is

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<sup>36</sup> The *golah* community refers to the returnees (from among the Judahites exiled by the Babylonians) to Yehud during the early Persian period. The Persian period is the era from 538-332 BCE, during which the Achaemenid Empire was in control of southeast Asia, where the former kingdoms of Judah and Israel were located. The Persian province of Yehud roughly corresponds to the territory of Judah.

<sup>36</sup> Christine Roy Yoder offers a persuasive argument for the Persian period context. *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31*, BZAW 304 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), Chapter 1. As one will see throughout, Yoder's work on the socio-economic place of women in this period is important for understanding the historical context of Proverbs 31:10-31.

<sup>37</sup> Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 77-78.

<sup>38</sup> Christine Roy Yoder, "The Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31," *JBL* 122.3 (2003): 427n.1. Al Wolters argues that the poem is a heroic hymn, and that the woman of *ḥayil* is best understood as a female counterpart of the men titled *gibbōr ḥayil* "mighty men of valour." Al Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn," *VT* 38.4 (1988): 453.

<sup>39</sup> Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn," 453-456. For example, in Proverbs 31:15, the term *ṭerep*, "food" or "nourishment," carries the sense of "prey," invoking warlike imagery to the woman's activity (454). Likewise, the language of 31:17 is reminiscent of warriors (453). Wolters observes that in contrast to other ancient Near East poetry in praise of women that focuses on a woman's physical beauty or sex appeal, Proverbs 31:10-31 praises the woman for her actions (456).

<sup>40</sup> Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn," 455.

<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that a wife's sexual fidelity was not important in the Persian period, but it is not the concern in these verses.

<sup>42</sup> Wolters notes that the term *šālāl* provides warlike imagery, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn," 454.

<sup>43</sup> Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 274-75.

possible because of the household's wealth; and the woman's resources, economic activities, and household management skills allow her the resources to sit among the elders of the land (v. 23).

Women are far more involved in the economic life during the Persian period than readers today might presume. While a wife's responsibilities are focused on the family and household, women perform various kinds of work in a variety of contexts.<sup>44</sup> The woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 appears to be an amalgamation of elite women in the presentation of her economic activities.

The poem is focused on the woman as an active economic agent within the household (vv 13-22, 24).<sup>45</sup> Women were responsible for the education and care of their children and the management of the household's economic activities.<sup>46</sup> The Proverbs 31 woman provides care for her household, including the procurement of food (vv.14-15) and making their clothing (vv. 13 and 21).<sup>47</sup> Perhaps the poem also refers to her role in educating her children in verse 26.<sup>48</sup> Her task in managing the household is reflected in verses 15, 27. She also is in charge of managing her maiden-servants, *na'arot* (a term that might suggest they are of an upper class status).<sup>49</sup>

In the Persian period, the activities that a woman might do vary depending on the household and woman's wealth. Women work in the market places and in textile industries.<sup>50</sup> In Proverbs 31:13 and 19, the woman engages in making textiles. The woman in Proverbs 31 is not just active in making her household's garments, but also is involved in the market place, selling and trading garments and sashes (v. 24). Yehud enjoined "unprecedented growth in international commerce" during the Persian period.<sup>51</sup> The term translated traders, *kena'ani* (the word for Canaanites, but became synonymous with Phoenician traders) implies international trade.<sup>52</sup> The purple of the woman's clothes is the result of purple dye imported from afar. The imagery of bringing food from afar and merchant ships also reflect the international commerce of Yehud, in which the Proverbs 31 woman is operating.

As managers of the family business and agents of their husbands, women might engage in such activities as purchasing and leasing land.<sup>53</sup> She could purchase land from her own wealth. For royal women, land grants were an additional way she could acquire property.<sup>54</sup> These lands could be used to generate profit from their cultivation or from rents when land is leased out. Proverbs 31:16 imagines the woman purchasing a field and planting a vineyard. While the first part of the verse is ambiguous over whether she is buying a field as an agent of her husband or on her own account, the second half of the verse indicates she plants the vineyard "with the fruits of her hands." The verse suggests that the woman

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<sup>44</sup> Among the places and activities Yoder finds women working in the Persian empire include: in market places and textile industries; in royal stockyards and treasuries; working as scribes and tax handlers; making wine and beer; harvesting fields or shepherding livestock; working in armories or be members of garrisons; and working as artisans, stone workers, woodworkers, and goldsmiths. Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 59-61.

<sup>45</sup> It is misleading and anachronistic to apply the capitalist category entrepreneur to the woman. Nonetheless, some modern readers notice her economic activities and presume she embodied the entrepreneurial spirit, or point to this passage as support for entrepreneurialism as a biblical principle. See Peter Rios, "Wife as Entrepreneur: A Business View of Proverbs 31:10-31," *Journal of Ethics and Entrepreneurialship* 5.2 (2015): 71-76.

<sup>46</sup> Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Verse 22 mentions her clothing was made of fine linens and purple. This suggests her elite status since the fabrics tended to be imported from abroad. Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn," 455.

<sup>48</sup> Although, Clifford suggests her wisdom is related to the art of governing the household and instructions refer to her treatment of her servants. Clifford, *Proverbs*, 276.

<sup>49</sup> Wolters "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn," 455. See also, John MacDonald, "The Status and Role of the Na'ar in Israelite Society," *JNES* 35.3 (1976): 147-170.

<sup>50</sup> Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 59.

<sup>51</sup> Yoder, "The Woman of Substance," 440-443.

<sup>52</sup> Yoder, "The Woman of Substance," 441.

<sup>53</sup> Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 59.

<sup>54</sup> Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 65.

has sufficient wealth on her own to purchase and develop a vineyard – a labor intensive project that would not see an immediate return, an indication of the surplus wealth available to the woman. Elite women required sizeable workforces for their estates,<sup>55</sup> the *na 'arōt* for the woman may have been part of such a workforce for the woman in Proverbs 31 (31:15).

Women could also make money by providing loans to other people.<sup>56</sup> This activity might be reflected in Proverbs 31:20. While some readers might presume the woman is engaging in charity toward the poor and needy, I argue that charity is not necessarily an elite value but something they do to maintain the economic status quo. The verse might better be considered based the overall tenor of the poem which seems to be valorizing the woman's activities to strengthen and increase the household's wealth and status.<sup>57</sup> Read from this perspective, the woman opens her hands to the poor and needy through the giving of loans, which could generate substantial interest income for the woman and her household and could result in seizure of property if the terms of the loan were not met. Even if verse 20 is read more positively as the woman taking care of the poor and needy outside of the loan-game, it might still imply a patron-client relationship rather than an altruistic act of charity, one in which the patron bestows benefits to the poor in return for their loyalty and honors, a way of maintaining the economic status quo in society.

Finally, while the woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 can be understood as representing the activities of real women in the Persian period, she remains an impossible to attain ideal insider (i.e., not foreign) wife for elite men of the Judaeen community, not a normative prescription for all women. Contrary to the reading practice of some Christian women (and men) today, the Persian period scribe does intend the Proverbs 31:10-31 woman to be used by real women as an ethical model to embody; rather she serves as a pedagogical lesson for elite men, one “that furthers male objectives.”<sup>58</sup> Scholars suggest that the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is a symbol of Woman Wisdom.<sup>59</sup> As such, the elite man is to choose wisdom which will benefit him economically, like the wife's productivity that benefits the household without her husband's involvement: while one may not find a wife who can meet the standards of the woman in the poem, one can choose wisdom. This is to say, the elite patriarchal ideal for a wife as economic asset for the household in the Persian period, based on an amalgamation of real elite women, is used to persuade the male student of Proverbs to choose a life married to Woman Wisdom.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 65.

<sup>56</sup> Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 67; Yoder, “The Woman of Substance,” 439-440.

<sup>57</sup> Admittedly, many scholars see this verse as describing a virtuous act in terms of caring for the poor. For example, in his more positive reading of Proverbs 31, R.N. Whybray suggests, “It portrays a family which has achieved the worthy ambition referred to in such proverbs as 28.19, 20: of the blessings which will reward the honest and upright farmer and his family, who do not forget to be generous to those who are less fortunate than themselves.” *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, JSOTSup 99 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 116. Further, Harold C. Washington argues, “In the book of Proverbs, the folk wisdom of Judean village society, which stressed hard work and communal interdependence, is combined with ancient Near Eastern tradition emphasizing care for the poor.” *Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs*, SBLDS 142 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 203-4.

<sup>58</sup> Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 106-9.

<sup>59</sup> For example, Thomas P. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31,” *RB* 92.1 (1985): 25-46. See also Clifford, *Proverbs*, 274; Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 249-50; R.N. Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs*, JSOTSup 168 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 154-161.

<sup>60</sup> If Michael and I had discussed this passage over espresso, I imagine he would have inquired why I do not make a point of what is seemingly the primary virtue of the woman, she “fears the LORD” (v. 30). Since the note is primarily concerned with economic activities of the woman, I did not want to obscure them in the end with what some might see as primarily a theological virtue. But, I think the fear of the LORD can be explained: by attributing her economic successes to her fear of the LORD, the poem inscribes an elite ideology that sees economic prosperity as a result of God's blessing, not a result of human factors. In such an ideology, the elite are God's chosen and maintain that status through their piety. The poor's economic hardship is implicitly the result of their impiety. Nonetheless, this argument is for a different sort of paper than this note.

By looking at the Proverbs 31 woman in the context of the Persian period, this paper sought to emphasize the economic activities of the woman and her household. The Proverbs 31 woman gives a picture of elite economic values and activities in the Persian period. A better understanding of the historical context helps to explain the imagery and activities of the poem. An understanding of the historical context also shows some of the differences between modern values and concepts that sometimes inform contemporary readers' interpretations of this ancient text.

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## **Alumnus Essay**

*Pro-Secular?*

*Luke's Relationship with Roman Imperial System and Culture*

*He has...rescued [us] from the hands of our enemies, [so that] without fear we might worship him in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

- Luke 1:74-75

This statement, spoken by Zechariah at the birth of John the Baptist, serves as a forecast of where the story of Jesus and his early community will end up. Acts 28:30-31 reports its accomplishment when, talking about Paul's lodgings in Rome, it says, "He remained two full years in his lodgings. He received all who came to him, and with complete assurance and without hindrance he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." The narrative of Luke-Acts begins in Jerusalem (Lk 1:5-25), moves to Galilee (Lk 4:14-15), returns to Jerusalem (Lk 19:28), then ventures throughout Asia Minor and ends in Rome (Acts 28:14). The movement of the story is also the movement of the church, at least the movement of the church as Luke wanted to present it. With the Gospel of Luke terminating in the heart of the Roman Empire and the missionary call strong in the hearts of his main characters, the question arises as to how Luke reconciles the demands of the Christ event with the reality of imperial rule. It will be the goal of this paper to suggest that Luke-Acts presents a view of Christianity relating to the Empire in a way that is mutually beneficial. Luke does not maintain anti-imperial sentiments, nor does he see the church as diametrically opposed to the surrounding culture.

I will begin by assuming that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same author and can be taken together to constitute one unified narrative. This position has been convincingly argued by Luke Timothy Johnson<sup>61</sup> and Robert Tannehill<sup>62</sup> and it well accepted in scholarly circles. I will then investigate the reason Luke wrote a gospel, his background, and the sources he utilized to create his composition. Next, I will ask if Luke had a political project in mind when writing his story. Was it the case that Luke's intention was to suggest subversive practices that would undermine the Romans? Questions such as this one will be weighed against claims that Luke's desire was to present a politically harmless Jesus figure. Following, I will focus on how Luke actually understood the Empire and how it works to advance the Christian community toward its stated goal that, "repentance, for the

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<sup>61</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

<sup>62</sup> Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 1 & 2, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986).