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LADY WISDOM AND THE WOMAN OF STRENGTH: ESTEEMED FEMALE IMAGES IN  
PROVERBS

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## PROVERBS 8 AND 31:10-31

The book of Proverbs begins and ends with female imagery. Women are used as metaphors of both righteousness and wickedness in this book. They are viewed alternately as valued members of a household or detested members of a household. Some images of women are solidified into personifications, such as Lady Wisdom who is found throughout Proverbs 1-9, while others are more fleeting depictions of females, such as Proverbs 19:13b (NIV): “a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping”. The female images in Proverbs are very interesting independently and in relationship to each other. However to do a full analysis of all the female images in Proverbs would take much more space than is allotted here. Therefore this paper will focus in on two of the more favorable female images in the book; Lady Wisdom and the Woman of Strength. Both of these women appear to be esteemed by the narrator, or sage, in Proverbs and have sparked discussion about how best to understand and apply these metaphors to women throughout history.

### **Gendered Images in Proverbs**

When considering gendered images used in an ancient text, it is important to keep in mind “that these literary figures, as well as the social roles of women which influenced them, are all seen from the male sages’ perspective”.<sup>1</sup> What is mentioned in the texts, whether male or

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<sup>1</sup> Carole R. Fontaine, “The Social Roles of Women in the World of Wisdom,” in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (ed. by Athalya Brenner, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995 (26).

female images, do not likely express the full truth or picture of the reality of the people in that time and place. The sages create a snapshot of life by choosing what they deem “to be worthy of comment”.<sup>2</sup> In some ways the snapshot may limit what a modern audience is able to deduce about ancient life, but in other ways it may illuminate certain aspects. The female images in Proverbs demonstrate that women could be considered as teachers, counselors, and resolvers of conflict, all of which were roles of people considered wise. Since Proverbs contains both positive and negative representations of females, Fontaine suggests that women could use their role as one who teaches, advises, or manages conflict in good ways or bad ways.<sup>3</sup> The seductive woman in Proverbs 7 does indeed have something to teach young men who accept her invitation but they are lessons that will bring them harm instead of good (vs. 26-27).

### **Voice of the Sage**

While Fontaine takes the view that the sage in Proverbs is a male (M) voice, others suggest that it is possible the sage, at least at times, had a female (F) voice. Brenner substantiates that an F voice could take on the same attitudes and ideas of an M voice because women lived inside the cultural norms created by the men. Women would likely have bought into these norms and lived by them.<sup>4</sup> An F voice for the sage in Proverbs would not have to sound distinctly feminine, or even feminist, in order to be female. According to Bellis, it would make sense that a

<sup>2</sup> Fontaine, “Social Roles,” 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 28-35 and 40-46

<sup>4</sup> Athalya Brenner, “Some Observations on the Figurations of Woman in Wisdom Literature,” in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (ed. by Athalya Brenner, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 51-56.

mother would advise her son not to engage in illicit escapades with women other than his wife because she would understand how important his fidelity would be in protecting the family and its resources.<sup>5</sup> She even argues that this advice might actually make more sense coming from a female than from a male since “androcentric Israelite society seemed to tolerate a certain amount of promiscuity on the part of its men as long as the sexual partner was not a married woman”.<sup>6</sup> Married women staying faithful meant that there was not any doubt or confusion about paternity and rightful heirs to family property. If a man had children with someone other than his wife, he was stretching his resources to care for others and this would have been a concern of his wife. She knew her role was to provide him children to help out with labor and tasks but that his role was to provide for her; the more time he spent philandering with other women and offspring, the less resources he had available to care for her and her children.<sup>7</sup> The text does not always specify that it is a father talking to a son but that someone is talking to a son, which could include a mother as would appear to be the case in 31:1-9 where Lemuel’s mother taught him.<sup>8</sup>

### **Proverbs 8**

Although Lady Wisdom is portrayed in several places through Proverbs 1-9, chapter 8 contains both the sage discussing Lady Wisdom and her speaking on her own behalf. Her speech in chapter 8 is actually her second one in the book as she also called out to the people in Proverbs

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<sup>5</sup> Alice Ogden Bellis, “The Gender and Motives of the Wisdom Teacher in Proverbs 7,” in *Wisdom and Psalms: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)*, (ed. by Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 81-89.

<sup>6</sup> Bellis, “Gender and Motives,” 81.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Brenner, “Figurations of Women,” 51-56.

1:20-33. In that speech “she adopted the tone of the castigating prophet” but here she is more interested in revealing her own character and traits.<sup>9</sup>

### Literary Considerations

The structure of Proverbs 8 is that of poetry. It is a carefully crafted piece of poetry and it contains four sections.<sup>10</sup> It begins with an introduction by the sage of Lady Wisdom in vs. 1-3 and then she speaks for the other thirty-three verses in the chapter. Her speech can be divided up into the following four sections: verses 4-11 are her invitation for people to come and learn from her; 12-21 denote that she rules and has authority; 22-31 are her description of her role in creating the world; and 32-36 are her instructions for people to have life.<sup>11</sup>

#### **8:1-11**

The chapter opens with rhetorical questions about whether Lady Wisdom cries out to the people. The next two verses reveal that indeed she does and she does so at the high places of the city as well as at the gates of the city (vs. 2-3). The locations she has chosen to advertise herself are central locations of community life and business. She has placed herself in the center of “human activity, commerce, justice, and teaching” in the city such that “wisdom becomes the medium of social order and the basis of life-sustaining teaching that maintains creation”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Westminster Bible Companion, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 62.

<sup>10</sup> Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs* (Interpretation Commentary Series, Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 138.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

Unlike the woman in the previous chapter, when Lady Wisdom calls out she does so loudly and publicly.<sup>13</sup> Camp points out an association with this previous woman, who is looking for and calling out to potential sexual partners in the streets (7:10-12); it is possible to view both female images here as being sexually aggressive in their attempts to get attention from the men in the city.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Perdue notes that ancient teachers would also have been in these locations looking for willing students to join them and learn.<sup>15</sup> In that case, Lady Wisdom would seem to be acting within her role as a teacher and not an overly-eager seductress.

When Lady Wisdom begins speaking in verse 4, her invitation becomes a personal one. It is not the sage speaking for her to the people to interest them in what she has to say and offer. Rather Lady Wisdom takes an active role in recruiting followers and convincing them that what she says is both truthful and righteous.<sup>16</sup> She appeals to them also through persuasion that what she can give them is better than silver, gold, or jewels (8:10). As Fox notes, she is not denouncing having money or trying to teach them to avoid wealth but she sets wisdom and correction “above legitimately valued items”.<sup>17</sup> Wisdom is better than wealth and wisdom cannot be bought by riches, jewels, or anything else. Those who follow her may become rich but that is not the reason to follow Lady Wisdom and seek after her ways; someone who tries to be wise in order to gain wealth has missed the point of Lady Wisdom and her message.

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<sup>13</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday, 2000), 265.

<sup>14</sup> Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985), 127.

<sup>15</sup> Perdue, *Proverbs*, 139.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>17</sup> Fox, *1-9*, 270.

**8:12-21**

The second and third sections of chapter 8 switch to a focus on Lady Wisdom's "practical intelligence" and "generosity".<sup>18</sup> In verse 12 she aligns herself with cunning or prudence but does not say that she is fully equated with it but that she "inhabits" it.<sup>19</sup> In 8:14b, she tells her listeners that she has both insight and strength (NIV) and according to Fox, this part of the verse uses the word "*tušiyah*, which denotes clear, efficient thinking in the exercise of power and practical operations, as distinct from thinking as an intellectual act," meaning that she has the ability to strategize, plan, and weigh decisions when she advises.<sup>20</sup> When rulers partner with her, they are effective leaders. Theologically it is important to recognize that she does not limit herself to being used solely by Israel or Israeli leaders; any leader can see her and use her. Many scholars believe Proverbs to be composed during a postexilic period, a time when Israel did not have its own rulers and the glory days of good Hebrew monarchs had passed; yet if wisdom was attainable by any person or ruler, regardless of ethnicity, Israel could still be cared for by a wise leader and God could still work through that person.<sup>21</sup>

**8:22-31**

In this section, Perdue draws comparisons to Lady Wisdom as the queen of heaven and to goddess imagery of ancient religions, especially goddesses over fertility and war.<sup>22</sup> Whether or

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<sup>18</sup> Fox, *1-9*, 271

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>21</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Perdue, *Proverbs*, 142.

not one takes a view that Lady Wisdom is emulating other ancient goddesses at this point, she does seem to state that she was created by God and was present for the creation of the world. The use of *ganami* in verse 22 could be translated as “acquired,” as in one who possess something or someone, or as “created”.<sup>23</sup> She is “is simultaneously a creature of God, co-creator with God, and the principle inspiring the creation and constitution of the universe”.<sup>24</sup> Her existence is also a delight to the Creator and both Perdue and Fox consider the imagery in this section to paint Lady Wisdom as a child, a young girl frolicking about to the joy of her watching Father.<sup>25</sup> She is also a creature capable of delight and finds hers in humanity. Perdue also discusses how *'āmôn* in verses 30-31 could reflect more of the delightful child image but it gets translated in the NRSV (and NIV) as “master worker” and states that this “intimates that Wisdom is an architect who designs and builds, in this case, the cosmos” and that this actually “does correlate well with the context, for verses 27-29 depict Yahweh as the divine architect”.<sup>26</sup>

### **8:32-36**

At the end of chapter 8, Lady Wisdom invites listeners to follow her once again. The repetition of this invitation at the end (8:32-36) and the beginning (8:4-11) is a sort of an inclusion of wisdom as teacher and demonstrates that this is “the fundamental emphasis”.<sup>27</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> Fox, *1-9*, 279.

<sup>24</sup> Silvia Schroer, “Wise and Counselling Women in Ancient Israel: Literary and Historical Ideals of the Personified *ḥokmâ*,” in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (ed. by Athalya Brenner, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 69.

<sup>25</sup> Fox, *1-9*, 285-288 and Perdue, *Proverbs*, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Perdue, *Proverbs*, 145.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.



chapter ends but Lady Wisdom does continue into chapter 9 and there she is contrasted with Lady Folly very specifically. In chapter 8, Wisdom has been personified as female and teacher.

### **Proverbs 31:10-31**

#### Literary Considerations

The twenty-two verses about the Woman of Strength are created as an acrostic poem with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet but it does not seem to contain any “demarcation of major literary structures”.<sup>28</sup> While strophes and other poetic structures may be lacking, the poem does still cohere and maintain a “logical flow from her value to her achievements to the praise these bring her”.<sup>29</sup> Wolters argues that this collection of verses is not just a poem or wisdom psalm but a heroic hymn. While this view is not widely accepted among scholarship, Wolters makes several points to connect Proverbs 31:10-31 with the genre of hymns and heroes. He begins this attempt by comparing these verses with Psalm 112, a psalm considered to be a wisdom psalm about a man’s work and fear of the Lord.<sup>30</sup> He finds similarities in their antitheses at the end about righteousness and fearing the Lord and in their content because both subjects are described by wisdom, wealth, children, caring for the poor, and a lack of fear of the future.<sup>31</sup> He then points out that Psalm 112 is a mirror of Psalm 111, which he believes to be a heroic hymn about God

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<sup>28</sup> Perdue, *Proverbs*, 277.

<sup>29</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 890.

<sup>30</sup> Al Wolters, *The Song of the Valiant Woman: Studies in the Interpretation of Proverbs 31:10-31* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2001), 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> Wolters, *Valiant Woman*, 5.

and that all three of these poems are acrostics from the Hebrew alphabet.<sup>32</sup> He defines the structure of a hymn as having an introduction that announces the subject of the praise, a body that details the traits and works of the “mighty one being acclaimed,” and an exhortation at the end to encourage others to join in praise of the subject; he applies this structure to Proverbs 31 with 10-12 as the introduction, 13-27 as the body, and 28-31 as the ending exhortation.<sup>33</sup> Wolters sees this hymn as heroic because it emphasizes the valor of the woman, as though she is a mighty warrior through the use of *hayil* at the beginning and end of the section, as well as her plentiful deeds that have garnered her praise and her seemingly upper-class status.<sup>34</sup>

Wolter’s view stems from a belief that hymns do not have to be written only about God, a view that Fox does not hold.<sup>35</sup> Rather Fox believes hymns are reserved for God and that this poem of praise is an encomium, which is a “declamation of lofty praise for a person or a type of person”.<sup>36</sup> He believes that these verses are a type for women and not about an individual woman and with this he even considers that it might be a macarism, which would “depict an ideal to be emulated and tell of the blessings such a one enjoys” and he also compares it to Psalm 112.<sup>37</sup> He believes that whatever the literary genre of these verses, they could easily function in several ways among the people. They could serve as warnings to young men searching for wives,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>33</sup> Wolters, *Valiant Woman*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 9-11.

<sup>35</sup> Fox, *10-31*, 902.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 902.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 904.

examples for young women who will become wives, and be a way of expressing gratitude to one's mother or wife by reciting it to her or on her behalf.<sup>38</sup>

### Translation Considerations

There are several words in Proverbs 31:10-31 that are often debated for translation. One of them is *hayil*, which appears at the beginning and towards the end of this poem. In common readings and studies for laypeople, it has often been used as capable or worthy. Many people may not be aware that it has more meanings. It can also be translated as strength or noble things, which is how Fox uses it, while others take it to mean valor and emphasize the military aspects, such as Wolters. Strength can include the military aspects but it also covers the strengths the woman has in economics and physical abilities as well as her character and practical skills.<sup>39</sup>

Verse 10 holds another debated word and phrase. It uses *mohar*, which often refers to the bride-price that the bridegroom pays the bride's family. If this is about a literal woman, her bride-price is incredibly high since it is more than jewels; such a high-price might be desirable by young men but would also be highly unaffordable and therefore deter young men from seeking such wives.<sup>40</sup> If *mohar* is taken metaphorically, however, the verse conveys that the woman is "truly priceless" and "off the scale of monetary value"; it is not money that will earn her for a young man but rather fear of the Lord and the path of wisdom that will.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 905.

<sup>39</sup> Fox, *10-31*, 891.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 891-892.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 892.

Verse 19 describes the woman's ability to weave and spin cloth. The first line of this verse has a "hapax legomenon of unknown meaning," *kîšôr*.<sup>42</sup> Scholars are not very sure what this word means, other than it seems to be associated with the task of spinning. Whether it means distaff or refers to a part of a spindle or spinning device is unknown to contemporary audiences. Wolters has an interesting discussion of several different ancient practices used in spinning and concludes it is a largely unfamiliar device that required being grasped by both hands.<sup>43</sup>

The translation of one word is not necessarily debated but the emphasis on how it is used is. The eighteenth line of this poem, verse 27, must begin with *šādê*, the eighteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet; for this task, the sage chooses the word *šôpiyyâ*.<sup>44</sup> Wolters takes the use and form of this word to be a play on the Greek word for wisdom, *sophia*.<sup>45</sup> Whereas other verbs in the poem use a perfect or imperfect form, *šôpiyyâ* is a participle. Had it followed the pattern of the other verbs, its form would be *šāpētâ*.<sup>46</sup> He also sees the use of *šôpiyyâ* and its participle form as part of the hymnic quality of the poem.

One of the most commonly quoted verses from this poem is 30. It has made its way into feminist circles as well as has often been the motto of many women's Bible studies and the focus of several youth group girls' retreats. The sage's words here are likely not focused on denying beauty from the world or from women but rather deterring a focus on it, especially when

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<sup>42</sup> Wolters, *Valiant Woman*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Wolters, *Valiant Woman*, 42-56.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 34-39.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

choosing a spouse. The sage wants listeners to know that “appearances are untrustworthy and transitory” and to be careful about “valuing women according to their looks”.<sup>47</sup> The sage does not tell the listeners to not value looks at all; rather the instruction is not to make decisions based on appearances or to put beauty above all else. After all, beauty is a part of the world God created and can be a gift from God like many other traits and attributes; and like any other gift from God, humanity has the power to misuse it and misvalue it.<sup>48</sup>

### Interpretation and Application Options

One of the difficulties of this poem is trying to understand who the woman is or might have been. In Jewish rabbinic traditions, it has largely been assumed that the Woman of Strength is actually the Torah; this poem has been recited at the beginning of the Sabbath every week.<sup>49</sup> Alternate views have existed in Judaism, such as viewing the woman as the body or soul or even as historical figures such as Sarah. Yet none of these views have become the dominant voice in Jewish tradition. In the Christian tradition, there was a widespread disparity among early church leaders about the woman. Some such as Gregory of Nazianze, Paulinus of Nola, and Clement of Alexandria viewed her to have been a real and literal woman.<sup>50</sup> Yet most of the views in the tradition of the church have been allegorical up until the Reformation. Origin thought she represented the soul, Hilary thought she was wisdom, Epiphanius of Salamis and Johannes

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<sup>47</sup> Fox, *10-31*, 898.

<sup>48</sup> Fox, *10-31*, 89.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 905-907.

<sup>50</sup> Wolters, *Valiant Woman*, 64-67.

Cassianus thought she was the church, and Andrew of Crete thought she was the Virgin Mary.<sup>51</sup> Eventually the allegory of the church was the view that was solidified through the help of Augustine and Gregory the Great; “for more than a thousand years, in both traditions, there was an overwhelming consensus that the Valiant Woman should be understood allegorically”.<sup>52</sup>

When the Reformation happened in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a shift in the view of the woman also occurred. It was the works of Luther and Melancthon that began to consider the woman as a real woman; they did not argue against the allegorical view but simply assumed she was real.<sup>53</sup> This view gained more ground and favor among other leaders and scholars and was solidified by the works of two Catholics, Cornelius Jansensius and Luis de León.<sup>54</sup> This view is still popular today and leads many women to strive to be like her.

### **Relationship of Lady Wisdom and the Woman of Strength**

The relationship between Lady Wisdom and the Woman of Strength partially depends on whether you see Proverbs 31 as realistic or metaphor for women. If one believes the Woman of Strength to be literal, she can serve as the “human counterpart to Lady Wisdom”.<sup>55</sup> Yee even goes as far to say that they are “one and the same: one literal, the other metaphorical”.<sup>56</sup> Fox suggests that the two women are related and that the Woman of Strength is the typification of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 67-73.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>53</sup> Wolters, *Valiant Woman*, 100-108.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 116, 118.

<sup>55</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 151.

<sup>56</sup> Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 152.

Lady Wisdom, who is the personification of wisdom.<sup>57</sup> As a typification she is “not a particular woman but an ideal...a paragon of feminine virtues, practical and ethical”.<sup>58</sup> If one did not believe the Woman of Strength to be literal, they could feasibly see her as the same as Lady Wisdom but described differently; or their view may depend on the allegory they read.

It does seem easy to say that these two female images are aligned, especially against their foes. Lady Folly and the Strange Woman are the “evil antithesis” of Lady Wisdom and the Woman of Strength.<sup>59</sup> They do the opposite of each other; Lady Wisdom speaks of noble, right, and true things but her enemy flatters and seduces.<sup>60</sup> Lady Wisdom prepares a meal on her own and calls people to repentance but her enemy steals for her partner and calls him to sin.<sup>61</sup> Their differences can be summed up in their attitudes; “Woman Wisdom is committed to righteousness and justice (8:20), in contrast to the Strange Woman who rejects moral boundaries”.<sup>62</sup>

### **Impact for Twenty-first Century Readers**

In today’s world, feminist scholars differ in their opinions on the Woman of Strength. In some ways she is celebrated for her efforts outside the house; yet she is also dismissed because much of her focus and identity is tied to her work at home for her family. She is neither just a

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<sup>57</sup> Fox, *10-31*, 909.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 912.

<sup>59</sup> Yee, *Banished Children*, 135.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel J. Estes, “What Makes the Strange Woman of Proverbs 1-9 Strange?” in *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue* (ed. by Katharine Dell, New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 154.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 154.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

homemaker nor a modern feminist. It is interesting to consider that whether women want to strive for this ideal or it is pushed upon them, there is little talk of Psalm 112, which has been noted as having parallels in structure and content about a man. The Lady Wisdom is easy to revere because she either presents no challenge to identity as a successful woman or because her challenge is extended to all people to live wisely and fear the Lord.

Today's society is very different from the one of the ladies of Proverbs. Society is driven by technology and industry rather than farming and ranching. It is more acceptable for women to work outside the home and for men to participate in child-raising. On average, women and men do not marry as young. People cannot simply "make facile comparisons between the biblical figure and the suburban housewife, or alternately between her and the modern career woman".<sup>63</sup> Children are "expensive luxuries" instead of "economic necessities".<sup>64</sup> Since the home has become "a place of consumption rather than production" and "very few households in our highly industrialized culture aim at self-sufficiency or produce any significant portion of their own food or clothing," people must consider what place the Woman of Strength has in today's world.<sup>65</sup> It would be interesting to consider, if she were indeed an historical figure, what she thinks of the words written of her deeds and how she feels she measures up to them. Women today cannot be exactly like her in form, but perhaps there are principles from her poem that can be combined with the values and principles of Lady Wisdom to guide modern women in creating an identity based not on career or marital status but on fearing the Lord.

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<sup>63</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 154.

<sup>64</sup> Bellis, "Gender and Motives," 83.

<sup>65</sup> Davis, *Proverbs*, 154.



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