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## Who's that Lady?

*Meghan Henning '04*

<i>Aleph</i>	A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.
<i>Bet</i>	The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.
<i>Gimel</i>	She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.
<i>Dalet</i>	She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.
<i>He</i>	She is like the ships of the merchant, and brings her food from far away.
<i>Waw</i>	She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls.
<i>Zain</i>	She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
<i>Het</i>	She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.
<i>Tet</i>	She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. her lamp does not go out at night.
<i>Yod</i>	She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
<i>Kaph</i>	She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.
<i>Lamed</i>	She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson.
<i>Mem</i>	She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.

<b>Nun</b>	<b>Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.</b>
<b>Samek</b>	<b>She makes fine linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.</b>
<b>Ain</b>	<b>Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.</b>
<b>Pe</b>	<b>She opens her mouth with wisdom; and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.</b>
<b>Zade</b>	<b>She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.</b>
<b>Qoph</b>	<b>Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her;</b>
<b>Resh</b>	<b>"Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."</b>
<b>Shin</b>	<b>Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.</b>
<b>Taw</b>	<b>Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.</b>

**Proverbs 31:10-31 (An Acrostic poem in Hebrew)**

**W**omen filed into the small room, at the Campus Crusade for Christ Spring retreat, anxious to learn more about how they as women could better serve God. Two of the younger women opened in prayer and directed everyone to Proverbs 31:10-31, the "Song of the Valiant Woman." As the discussion of this passage progressed the women were overwhelmed by all that the woman in the text had accomplished, holding her up as the standard to which a "Godly woman" should conform. This "valiant woman" seemed to be the Barbie of the Bible, an impossible dream that one could never fully attain. And yet, the leaders of the group were suggesting that each woman could, in fact, emulate this woman, if only they tried harder and "trusted God more" with the responsibilities of college life. Then, women wrote down a few ways in which they could improve themselves, using the text as a guide for becoming "God fearing women."

This illustration reveals the manner in which women of faith have looked to the woman of Proverbs 31 for guidance. As they do so they are often chagrined to find a veritable superwoman in both the private and public spheres.

Thus, the Proverbs 31 text becomes problematic for women of faith, seeming to suggest that they have to add more responsibilities, take on more roles, and “wear more hats,” just to bring honor to their husbands and families. Consequently, scholars who represent various schools of thought have sought to “reclaim” this text in a way that makes more sense for the contemporary woman, asking the question “Who’s that Lady?” Often these theological endeavors are conducted in ways that unwittingly impose foreign agendas on the text with questions that are totally removed from its original intentions. Granted, all scholars bring some agenda to the text, whether consciously or not, but those who are conscious of their perspective often do more justice to the text’s meaning. This paper will argue that, when not treated carefully, agendas foreign to the text’s world inhibit scholars from correctly identifying the Proverbs 31 woman because they force scholars to make false assumptions about the text. Fortunately other scholarship has tried to reclaim the text in less violent ways, aiming to identify first the Valiant Woman’s identity in her original context before thrusting her into Twenty First Century America. As these scholars take a closer glance, they find that a text, which was meant to encourage women in the ancient world, is being taken out of context and used to discourage women in contemporary society. Therefore this paper will ultimately make some conclusions about the original identity of the Proverbs 31 woman and then make some suggestions about who that woman might be today.

## **I. The violent voices of contemporary scholars: Who that Lady is *not***

First we must look to the scholars who have been paying the most attention to the Proverbs 31 woman and evaluate their interpretive methods. Liberation theologians (including feminist and womanist theology as well) are very concerned with the Biblical portrait of womanhood that this text paints, seeing a desperate need to “resignify,” or re-contextualize this text for a contemporary culture that is vastly different from the one in which the text is “embedded” (Bergant, 3-8). Unfortunately, many of the scholars that fall into this camp attempt to re-contextualize this text with very little concern for its original context at all. They also make no conscious notice of the fact that their interpretive methods are driven entirely by an agenda and questions that are foreign to the perspective from which the text was written and first read.

For example, Dianne Bergant admits that her “liberation-critical” reading of Wisdom literature “deliberately avoids questions of a historical nature and proceeds from a reader-centered approach” (Bergant, ix, 1-14). She believes that the

only way in which any theology can “reclaim” a Biblical text for a contemporary context is by accounting for issues of sustainability and enlisting the voices of the marginalized. Furthermore, Bergant makes very clear that she is writing from “feminist concerns,” starting with the assumption that Biblical texts were produced by men in a patriarchal culture. Consequently, her entire analysis of Proverbs 31 is conducted under the assumption that regardless of the historical context, the texts communicate to the reader that the domination of another is accepted and even admired (Bergant, vii-ix). This Liberation-Critical analysis of Proverbs 31 concludes that the Proverbs 31 woman might be ideal, but only according to the ideals of a patriarchal society in which a woman’s worth is judged in terms of her utility to man, and there seems to be a public versus private division of male and female labor (Bergant, 99). According to Bergant all of the Hebrew Bible is laden with these gender biases, and in the case of Proverbs only those Proverbs that supported the opinions of those in power were retained as an accurate expression of social norms (Bergant, 93-94).

Similarly, Jorge Maldonado has problems with the Proverbs 31 woman because she does not reflect the need for solidarity in the third world. On the surface it does not connect with poorer women who cannot live up to the roles that the valiant woman fills – i.e. a seeming economic independence (Maldonado, 36). Thus, like Bergant, Maldonado sees a need to reclaim this text by emphasizing the elements of the passage, which may indicate that this woman is in fact, “unusual, atypical and...revolutionary for her time” (Maldonado, 37; Bergant, 92-104). While both these theologians make interesting points about ways in which this woman is wielding power and doing things that were inconceivable for her time, they provide no evidence for this beyond the demands that their agendas place on the text. That is, they seek almost exclusively to read the text from a 21st Century lens. At one point Maldonado actually makes an argument for the two-income household from the place in the passage where the woman’s children bless her. Here Maldonado presumes that her children bless her because of her role as a revolutionary workingwoman, based upon the economic activities she carries out in the text, wrongfully presuming that these activities were “revolutionary” for an Ancient Israelite woman. Finally, Maldonado takes this conclusion a step farther, making this text the mouthpiece for a modern agenda (justifying a two-income household with pop-psychology from Oprah): “parents need to derive satisfaction from what they do in order to raise healthy, independent, and secure children” (Maldonado, 38-39).

Liberation theologians are not the only scholars who allow an agenda to interfere with the analysis of the Proverbs 31 passage. A literalist, Jill Briscoe, uses a method similar to that of Bergant and Maldonado, only from the perspective of conservative Christianity. Briscoe is a literalist, but in order to reclaim this text she proclaims that the Proverbs 31 woman is merely an ideal, who never lived at all. As support for this position she does not cite contextual evidence but simply states that “she (the Proverbs 31 woman) appears to be a very together person” (Briscoe, 9-15). Briscoe’s work begins here, suggesting that contemporary women tackle this overwhelming and unattainable ideal by “beginning with the self,” using Proverbs 31 as a self-help guide. Briscoe’s self-help approach reclaims the edgy and unattainable goals that this text has upheld and demythologizes them with conservative doctrines of redemption (Briscoe, 28-41).

Briscoe also “reclaims” the text via individualistic thought stating that the valiant woman of Proverbs 31 “wouldn’t have an equal because *every woman is unique*...some of us have some of her talents and some of us have other gifts that are not mentioned here” (Briscoe, 30). This misstep in interpretation further ignores the context of the passage, totally denying that the activities of the Proverbs 31 woman might have had a different significance in her world than whatever significance they hold in our contemporary world, missing a crucial piece of her identity. Likewise, individualism and autonomy are the guiding contemporary assumptions, which Nancy Rockwell brings to the Proverbs 31 text, using these verses to legitimate the pro-choice argument in the abortion debate (Rockwell, 24-27). Her conclusions may or may not represent what a God-fearing woman might do in these circumstances, but this cannot be discerned from her arguments because she fails to treat the text with responsibility. In her conclusions she uses passionate language to make her point, rather than calling upon the historical identity of the Proverbs 31 woman or the context of these verses in the larger Biblical tradition (Rockwell, 27). In the final analysis, for both Briscoe and Rockwell, the Proverbs 31 woman can be translated to today’s society with absolutely no regard for differences between the ancient culture and today’s world, leaving both authors free to make the text say what best suits their respective contemporary audiences.

On the contrary, not all writers who see the Proverbs 31 woman as an asset to their cause do such violence to the text. For example, Madipoane Masenya writes from a womanist perspective while paying close attention to the context of this passage. Masenya is honest about the fact that some of the questions we ask are foreign to the frame of reference supplied by the text. As she comes to

Proverbs 31, she too notices that this woman's identity is wrapped up in her husband and cannot be understood independently (Masenya, "Bosadi," 152-155). Rather than throwing out these pieces of the story and focusing on whatever speaks readily to the contemporary South African problems, Masenya takes the time to identify who the valiant woman was in her original context so that she can compare that context with South Africa and interpret accordingly. Thus, Masenya concludes (with the help of Camp's essay on household economy in Ancient Israel) that the Proverbs 31 woman of worth "is a family woman who has the concerns of her household at heart" (Masenya, "Bosadi," 152). This means that today the needs of the household should be at the heart of both African men and women, because men and women's roles are no longer so sharply divided. This places responsibility for economic subsistence on "God fearing" men and women (Masenya, "Bosadi," 152-154).

## **II. Biblical Background of Proverbs 31:10-31: Who was that Lady?**

Masenya identifies the Proverbs 31 woman as an androgynous symbol for economic responsibility. Still one is left wondering, who is that lady? One also wonders if she is a contemporary workingwoman, legitimating the two-income household as Bergant and Maldonado suggested. Or is she the model of a unique individual, illustrating self-assurance for women in a contemporary world, as Briscoe and Rockwell suggest? Or perhaps she is an exemplar of one who cares for the subsistence needs of the family. The answers to these questions are not as easily uncovered as some of these scholars contend. As Masenya's work suggests, one can find a richer, truer picture of the Proverbs 31 woman simply by researching her context within the Biblical narrative. Patricia Gundry also points to a deeper interpretive method, calling readers to view this text as a call to personal wholeness that can only be found when one searches for the "complete woman," of Proverbs 31 (Gundry, 15). Thus, any reading of Proverbs 31 must examine all that this woman was to determine all that she would be today.

First, attention must be given to the text's position within Proverbs itself. The book of Proverbs is part of the wisdom tradition. Wisdom literature encompasses a variety of genres, but the common theme is a connection between godly prudence and every day life. Proverbs contains two of the four types<sup>1</sup> of wisdom literature as identified by R. E. Murphy; "practical wisdom" and "theologizing wisdom" ("Assumptions and Problems," 104). Practical wisdom outlines what is meant by "fear of the Lord," providing applications for religious

conduct and guidelines for everyday transactions (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems, 104). The other type of wisdom that is found in Proverbs is the theologizing of wisdom, simply representing the notion that all wisdom originates with God. The theologizing of wisdom provides a link to the creation narrative in that humans can understand the world only because the Divine creator imparts Divine wisdom, as found in Proverbs (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems," 104, Perdue, 37, 47). An example of theologizing wisdom is the Woman Wisdom who opens the book of Proverbs and is described in more detail in chapter 8, a personification of Divine Wisdom that gives life to this character who under rides the very creation of the earth and pursues men and women, convincing them to take the prudential "path less traveled."

While Murphy makes a distinction between these two types of wisdom, they are inextricably linked in Proverbs, which stands in sharp contrast to the contemporary dichotomy between the sacred and secular (Whybray, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 4). That is, the book of Proverbs describes the ways of the world and then provides practical instructions for living within this world order. The Proverbs themselves have a narrative character, particularly when describing the consequences of a given action. A prudent manner of behaving is described and then followed by a description of a predictable reward or result of that type of behavior (Bergant, 79, 93-94). According to R. N. Whybray, this trend is reflective of the Old Testament world-view in which it is not counter-intuitive (unlike our contemporary world-view) for otherworldly "moral" practices to lead to practical, this worldly rewards, because all of these things fall into the same category of things which are "intrinsically good and desirable" (*New Century Bible Commentary*, 4).

Thus, any view of the Proverbs 31 woman must take into account this unitary view of life, taking care not to presume that her activities and her "fear of the Lord" are one in the same in her world. Furthermore, this world-view might suggest that her work within the household and in the city are not expressions of a patriarchal double standard in which women must "earn their keep," as suggested by some liberation theologians. Rather her work represents a responsibility to "behave rightly" in God's kingdom and in the world simultaneously via practical activities. Unfortunately this sense of unity is lost and even mistaken for oppression when looking at the text through a modern lens in which the dichotomies of sacred vs. secular are assumed.

Next, the structure of this particular Proverb must be examined. Proverbs 31:10-31 is in acrostic with each verse beginning with a consecutive letter of the



Hebrew alphabet. Scholars disagree over the effects that this form might have on the meaning of the passage. On the one hand, some think that this formal structure prevents the description of the ideal woman from being complete, and in effect removes any possibility for progression of thought, thematic sequence, or true narrative style (Bergant, 92; Whybray, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 426). In fact some scholars even regard all Biblical acrostics as “detractions from the true outpouring of emotion” (Minkoff, 31). On the other hand, other scholars think that this acrostic form adds to the meaning conveyed by the author, emphasizing that it indicates the author’s control and provides direction for a more intentional display of emotion (Minkoff, 31). This latter position is represented with greater strength in the literature. In the case of Proverbs 31:10-31, the acrostic structure reflects the completeness of this woman, showing that she covers her responsibilities from *aleph* to *taw* (the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet) (Bergant, 78, Gundry, 15, Minkoff, 31).

Furthermore, this acrostic structure points to Proverbs 31:10-31 as more than a collection of practical tidbits of advice (McCreesh, 25). The editor of Proverbs seems to have closed with Proverbs 31:10-31 as a book-end poem which mirrors the image of the “Woman Wisdom” in chapters 1-9 of Proverbs in “both form and content” (Bergant, 78). Most scholars agree that these concluding verses are probably a separate conclusion to the entire book of Proverbs, suggesting that all of the information within the book of Proverbs is based on the ideal that “the Fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 31:30; Bergant, 78; Brown, 49; McCreesh, 25; Minkoff, 31-46; Murphy, “Form Criticism,” 482; Perdue, 277; Whybray, 426). Throughout Proverbs there is a contrast between Woman Folly, “whose ways lead to death,” and Woman Wisdom, “who promises life” (Crenshaw, 355-56, McCreesh, 40, Perdue, 50). Proverbs 31:10-31 concludes this theme in favor of Woman Wisdom, and “draws together major themes, motifs, and ideas of the book in a final, summarizing statement about wisdom under the image of an industrious, resourceful, and selfless wife” (McCreesh, 25, 40).

The actual parallels between Woman Wisdom (Proverbs 1-9) and the Proverbs 31 woman, beyond the central one already mentioned (“Fear of the Lord”) are astounding. Both Woman Wisdom and the Proverbs 31 woman are “more precious than jewels” (Proverbs 3:15, 31:10). Whoever finds them will not lack material gain (3:13-14; 31:11). Also, Woman Wisdom is found at the city gates (the busiest center of the city where people enter and exit) calling out, and the Proverbs 31 woman is praised at the city gates. Finally, the theme that

Woman Wisdom builds her own house “of peace, industry and successful living,” is recapitulated in Proverbs 31 where the woman of valor’s well-managed household brings rewards to herself and others (comp. Proverbs 9:1; 14:1; Crenshaw, 355-56; Whybray, 426). At the very least all of these parallels indicate that the Proverbs 31 woman is a great example of what is considered “wise” throughout Proverbs (Whybray, “The Intellectual Tradition,” 17). Yet the style, positioning and thematic nuances of Proverbs 31:10-31 which have all been cited above, seem to indicate something stronger. The view of the Proverbs 31 woman as an intentional conclusion to the book of Proverbs suggests that she is indeed, the portrait of not only a Godly woman, but also of a Godly person-man or woman. This conclusion rests on the fact that she reflects all of the characteristics of Woman Wisdom, the female personification of God’s divine Wisdom, intended as an inspiration to both men and women for right thought and action. Thus, Masenya’s interpretation of the text in a way that places economic responsibility on both men and women is an accurate reflection of the literary characteristics of this text. (The significance this connection might have in terms of interpreting Proverbs 31:10-31 as a metaphorical figure rather than an actuality will be discussed in greater detail later.) In fact, as one seeks to read this passage within the context of Proverbs and the larger Wisdom tradition, Masenya’s conclusions move to the forefront, echoed by other scholars’ identification of this woman as a metaphorical representation of Woman Wisdom. These ideas are important to consider in greater depth, because they would suggest that the Proverbs 31 woman makes demands on all people, not just women, as commonly presumed by most theologians (Bergant, Briscoe, Gundry, Maldonado, Rockwell).

However, this focus on the literary character of Proverbs 31:10-31, should not be confused with form criticism. Form criticism, or identifying the form of the Proverb in order to try and discern information about the context is an arbitrary task to some degree (Murphy, “Form Criticism,” 481-483; Whybray, 14-15). There are very few clues as to how these sayings were used or who used them. In fact, many passages could have been didactic in more than one situation. For instance the Proverbs that begin with “my son” could be used on a variety of occasions beyond the biological parent-child relationship, carrying a great “density of meaning” (Murphy, “Form Criticism,” 481-483, “Interpretation,” 295-297). Consequently, the focus of the interpretation of Wisdom literature should not be upon the form itself, but rather on how the saying was understood and applied in reality. After all, as Murphy argues, the Wisdom tradition itself is con-

cerned with the "right action at the right time in the right manner" ("Assumptions and Problems," 109). Al Wolters provides a great example for Murphy's argument, engaging in form critical analysis of Proverbs 31 almost exclusively, making very precise, but minute conclusions. In fact, Wolters represents the opposite extreme of the theologians first considered here who paid no attention to the nuances of the text or its context. Wolters' work is fascinating and pays great attention to detail, and yet seems to be a lost cause if the Wisdom tradition is as diverse and nebulous as most scholars admit. For instance, Wolters spends an entire article identifying the form of Proverbs 31 as a heroic hymn, of the same form of hymns in praise of Yahweh elsewhere in Scripture ("Heroic Hymn," 446-457; "The Song of the Valiant Woman," 30-41). While this analysis does lead to some compelling conclusions about the woman of worth as a practical hero created to contrast erotic images of women in eastern culture, it ultimately fails to do justice to the text, ignoring its problematic nature as a part of the Wisdom tradition. This oversimplification also falls short of an answer to our driving question, "Who's that Lady?" inadequately dealing with the complexities of the text as it is situated in the entire, diverse, Wisdom tradition (Crenshaw, 353-354).

In light of the inadequacies of form criticism, one must turn to the Wisdom tradition at large in order to truly contextualize the Proverbs 31 woman. As one looks to the wisdom literature for clues, the parallel between Proverbs 1-9 and Proverbs 31 again becomes significant. John J. Collins and G. E. W. Nickelsburg identify two kinds of ideal figures in Ancient Judaism, raising the question of whether this woman functioned as a paradigmatic figure or an eschatological one (7-8). If she was paradigmatic she was perceived as a model intended for direct imitation. On the other hand, if the woman of valor was an eschatological figure she may have simply "given expression to the ideas which influenced behavior" (Collins and Nickelsburg, 8). T. P. McCreesh and William Brown both argue that this ideal figure is wholly eschatological in nature, simply a symbol of Woman Wisdom, based upon the variety and number of tasks she engages in, word repetition and allusions to wisdom or to a "wisdom activity" (Brown, 49, McCreesh, 44). Yet Collins and Nickelsburg warn against using the categories they created in order to dichotomize the text, arguing that one cannot systematically identify one type of ideal figure or another in Scripture, but she must pay careful attention to the context of each text/figure and the "unique characteristics of the individual phenomena" (11). In this instance such attention to context requires one to examine the extent to which wisdom, and then in particular this passage, was connected to the royal tradition. If there is a strong rela-

tionship there, then the Proverbs 31 woman was likely to have been a paradigmatic figure, setting up an ideal which was to be imitated with precision.

As many liberation theologians have assumed, the wisdom tradition originated in the royal tradition, reflecting the "ethos of the official classes," because the sages were associated directly with kings and leaders (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems," 103-104). Identifying the social background of Wisdom literature, Robert Gordis concludes that all Wisdom represents the pragmatism and conservatism of the upper-classes, serving and maintaining the interests of the status quo (79-82). However notions such as these have created a perceived dichotomy between Wisdom literature and the rest of Hebrew Scripture, presuming that Wisdom literature represented the demands of the status quo versus the prophetic voice present in the rest of Scripture (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems," 105). Again Murphy argues that this form of literary criticism isn't conclusive, that sharp lines cannot be drawn between prophecy and Wisdom. Rather, the two are inextricably related, because the Old Testament writers wrote out of the same culture in which both kinds of ideas were central.

Furthermore, Wisdom must still be considered Yahwistic, because it "was formed within a people in covenant with Yahweh" (Murphy, "Interpretation" 298). More specifically, the last section of Proverbs is not even likely to be from a courtly perspective due to the date of its addition with respect to the date of the exile and fall of such structures (Whybray, *New Century Bible Commentary* 9). Therefore, the Proverbs 31 woman is not just a symbolic hero as Wolters and McCreech might like to conclude, but she belongs within the entire Old Testament tradition, informing and also being shaped by other pieces of the culture that "believed in the LORD as Savior and Creator" (Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems" 108). Again, this requires the interpreter of Proverbs 31:10-31 to break down the false dichotomies and categories which have typically framed this debate. As Ralph Marcus suggests, personified Woman Wisdom has "an obscure position between personal being and principle. She is both, she is neither, the one nor the other" (161). This same view holds true then for the Proverbs 31 woman, who must be situated somewhere between paradigm and eschatological ideal, as she probably functioned in both capacities originally.

Finally, an alternative view of this text and its original context further elucidates that this woman was both a practical model and an eschatological ideal. Ellen Louise Lyons, like others notices that the Proverbs 31 woman looks like a pre-monarchial woman (237). In particular she carries out all of the same functions and roles as a woman from the pre-monarchial period would have done

according to Camp's functionalist perspective, and Meyers' work (Camp in Masenya, "South African Context" 60; Meyers in Masenya, "Bosadi" 150-151). In pre-monarchical society women carried out all of the work that required technical skill and they produced all of the "finished products." Women's work was also much more varied than men's and men in turn were working in the agricultural realm, trying to make unfertile soil produce (Meyers, 1-47). In this context women were key to the household's effectiveness and economic sustainability (Lyons, 238-239). Pre-monarchical women also still benefited from the financial security of a dowry, able to "laugh at the days to come" (Proverbs, 31:25; Gundry, 169). Situating Proverbs 31:10-31 in this context means that the Proverbs 31 woman was initially a pre-monarchical woman, accounting for what seems today to be outlandish industriousness. In addition to fitting the pre-monarchical paradigm of a "Godly woman," this text also makes sense in the era of reconstruction during the exile. Repopulating and rebuilding called for women's work. Thus, as Lyons suggested, the text itself was reclaimed in the post-exilic period because women as "productive, respected, members of society must have again become a valid cultural model" (Lyons, 242). This reclaiming of a pre-monarchical text for a post-exilic audience not only foreshadows a modern need to reclaim the text in this way, but also reveals the manner in which the Proverbs 31 woman acted as both paradigm and eschatological ideal. That is, she was and is today both a realistic representative of what a Godly woman looked like in ancient Israel and is simultaneously a wholly otherworldly ideal to which no woman could ever attain. As Brown suggests, the Proverbs 31 woman represents the embodiment of Wisdom, not in a set of guidelines, but in a picture of a pragmatic woman of high character, intended to preserve her community (49).

To summarize, the Proverbs 31 woman cannot be identified until one considers her rich history within both Proverbs and the Wisdom tradition. In this context her complex identity is unveiled, revealing that both her position in the text (as the conclusion of Proverbs) and her characteristics suggest a strong relationship to Woman Wisdom of Proverbs 1-9. Furthermore, the fact that the Proverbs 31 woman is not likely to represent the royal tradition of wisdom writing but rather a post-exilic memory of the ancient, pre-monarchical way of life, suggests that this text functioned as an eschatological ideal based on the paradigm of the Ancient Israelite woman. This ideal embodies the "ideas which influenced behavior," encouraging readers to pursue Godly wisdom in their own context, no matter what the practical means might be (Collins and

Nickelsburg, 8). That is, just as Woman Wisdom is seen carrying out the tasks needed to run the Ancient Israelite household (then central to the Hebrew community of faith) or to restore the kingdom after the exile, so also Woman Wisdom today would be found carrying out the practical tasks needed to restore the contemporary community of faith.

### III. So who *is* that Lady?

The Proverbs 31 woman is Woman Wisdom, the complete embodiment of Godliness in Ancient Israel, carrying out all of the practical responsibilities of the day. Since this eschatological ideal was originally based on the pragmatic concerns of post-exilic Israel, it should not be used to overwhelm or discourage people of faith today, but rather to spur individuals on to discovery of Divine Wisdom through practical activity. That is, this woman was not intended to be some unattainable standard or strict set of rules for conduct, but rather a representation of God's character that spurs the community on to restore God's kingdom on earth. The Proverbs 31 Woman is not an eschatological representation of a human woman, but of Godself. This eschatological ideal, then is not just for women, but for all people, men and women, painting a picture of part of God's character in which the tasks of daily life are completed, bringing honor and praise.

Precisely who is that Lady then, today? This consideration of her as Woman Wisdom does not remove any contemporary implications for daily life that she may have represented. In fact, it simply serves to remove the violence done to both the text and women when one interprets the Proverbs 31 Woman as a paradigm to be directly imitated today. Her function within the text was based loosely on a paradigm of the Ancient Israelite woman, but reclaimed in the post-exilic world as the personification of Woman Wisdom, used to challenge Israelites to restoration of Godly culture. Thus, she still challenges men and women today, not to the specific tasks of the Ancient Israelite household, or the male-female separation of roles (private vs. public), but to the spiritual connection between human and divine activity fueled by divine Wisdom. The Proverbs 31 Woman speaks boldly to the community of faith today, calling people of faith to join God in God's practical activities in the world.

While this interpretation may seem too broad or vague, it does have particular implications in different contexts. "God's practical activities" can be identified by calling upon God's activity as revealed thematically throughout Scripture (a task too large for this study to consider exhaustively). Here for brevity sake we will simply consider two aspects of God's activity: the restoration of

the community of faith and concern for the outsider. I have chosen these two aspects because they seem to connect most directly to the illustration that introduced a need to reclaim the Proverbs 31 woman at the outset of this work (i.e., a Denison women's retreat).

In the instance of the Campus Crusade for Christ movement, the Proverbs 31 woman is calling women and men of faith to join God in bringing healing and unity to a diverse group of believers on Denison's campus. The broken office of religious life, the exclusion of some religious groups, and the promise of a new program might be seen as a correlative to the broken temple in the post-exilic period. Thus, men and women of faith at Denison should look to the Proverbs 31 woman as a reminder that God is dynamically present in all aspects of the restoration process and participation in this process is actually joining God in God's activity. Second, the Proverbs 31 woman could be calling believers to take responsibility for the outsider, as illustrated throughout Scripture, joining God in this process of drawing the other in. On Denison's campus an example of this could be seen in the recent CommUNITY festival, a response to the hate expressed towards homosexuals by a group of religious fanatics. As women and men participated in this event they embraced diversity, and communicated love for those considered outcasts in society alongside God, joining Woman Wisdom in Her work.

So in conclusion, the answer to the question "Who's that Lady?" is found in context to be Woman Wisdom and can be recontextualized today to encourage the community of faith, as she once did, to join Her in God's practical activities in the world.

## Notes

1. Murphy's discussion of "types" of wisdom is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to illustrate that the category of "wisdom literature" is very broad, encompassing a wide variety of texts. Furthermore, more than one type of wisdom can be embodied in one text. The first two types of wisdom, not represented in the text at hand, are "judicial wisdom" and "nature wisdom." Judicial wisdom is evidenced in 1Kings 3 where Solomon gives out the correct decision in the case of the harlots, preserving order with the wisdom received from the Lord. Nature wisdom is seen in the secrets of nature, unveiled through sayings ("Assumptions and Problems," 40).

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