Beauty, Wisdom, and Handiwork in Proverbs 31:10–31*

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Abstract

The book of Proverbs concludes with an alphabetic acrostic that describes and praises its feminine subject (Prov 31:10–31). The poem's praise closes with a generalized critique of beauty, its deceptiveness and short-lived nature (v. 30). What function does this critique of beauty serve in light of the praise of the woman and her deeds? How do the poem and, specifically, this critique of beauty function in the broader organization of the book of Proverbs? This study argues that the poem rejects innate beauty in favor of acquired wisdom, a message that can be found elsewhere in Proverbs. The poem rejects beauty through an appeal to a rhetorical device—the "totalizing description"—which is used elsewhere to argue for a subject's beauty or perfection. Through the structure of the alphabetic acrostic, the poem carefully embeds its message of willed action and acquired wisdom; using a description of the woman's successive deeds, the poem shows how each deed leads to the enduring success of the woman's family, her community, and the subsequent generation.

Keywords

alphabetic acrostic, description, beauty, Proverbs, wisdom

* I dedicate this study to Ethan Schwartz and Leah Sarna on the occasion of their marriage.

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Introduction

The alphabetic acrostic concluding the book of Proverbs, in 31:10–31—"The Virtuous Woman," or "The Capable Wife"[1]—is widely interpreted as a praise of the poem's feminine subject.[2] This straightforward interpretation follows the speaker's description of the woman's children and husband, who rise to praise her, saying, "Many are the daughters who have done valiantly, but you have surpassed them all" (v. 29). Their praise anticipates the concluding verse of the poem—and the book of Proverbs in its present form—which calls upon the poem's audience to praise the woman: "Laud her[3] for the fruit of her hands, and let her deeds praise her in the gates."[4] These concluding words of praise—those in the mouths of the woman's husband and children in v. 29 and those in the voice of the poet in v. 31—frame a curious and seemingly out-of-place rebuke of beauty in v. 30: "Grace is a lie and beauty is ephemeral, but a woman, for (her) fear of Yahweh, she shall be praised." What does this critique of beauty mean, in light of the praise of the woman and her deeds? How does this concluding claim function in the broader organization of the book of Proverbs?[5] This study argues that the poem in Prov 31:10–31 rejects innate

[1] KJV; NRSV and NJPS.

[2] Al Wolters argued that even outside of a form-critical reading, "Students of the Hebrew . . . identify [the poem] freely as . . . a song of praise." See "Proverbs XXXI 10–31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form-critical Analysis," *VT* 38 (1988) 446–57, at 446–47. According to Michael Fox, Prov 31:10–31 "is best classified as an *encomium*" (Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31* [AB 18B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009] 903). On the form in Greek literature, Fox cites the work of Armin Schmitt, who includes the poem in his survey; see "Enkomien in griechischer Literatur," in *Auf den Spuren der schriftgelehrten Weisen* (ed. Irmtraud Fischer, et al.; BZAW 331; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003) 359–81. The fit is not perfect, however, since the Greek *encomium* has its own social and literary associations. See W. H. Race, "Encomium," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (ed. Roland Greene et al.; 4th ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) 409–10.

[3] This translation reflects a reading of the verb as a D 2mp imperative of /TNY/ (revocalized as *tannû*), meaning "recount, celebrate," as in Judg 5:11. See, e.g., Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10–31 as Heroic Hymn," 449, 456; Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville: Nelson, 1998) 245; but in favor of the MT, see Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31* (BZAW 304; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001) 83 n. 53. Taken as "laud," the verb would be semantically parallel to the verb in the second half of the poetic unit, "let them (her deeds) praise her." If the verb is understood as a G 2mp imperative of /NTN/, as it is vocalized in MT (cf. LXX, Vulg., Tg.), the sense would require anticipatory conceptual gapping from "praise her" in the second half of the poetic unit. The sense would then be "Give her (praise) for the fruit of her hands." Otherwise the phrase could be understood as a sentiment of compensation: "Give her (payment) from the fruit of her hands," (i.e., of her produced goods).

[4] In LXX, the object of praise is the husband (cf. v. 23), "and let her husband be praised in the gates."

[5] While the order of sections of Proverbs differs in MT and LXX, in both extant traditions Prov 31:10–31 closes the book. See Johann Cook, "The Septuagint of Proverbs," in *Law, Prophets, and Wisdom: On the Provenance of Translators and Their Books in the Septuagint Version* (ed. Johann Cook and Arie van der Kooij; CBET 68; Leuven: Peeters, 2012) 84–174, at 94. Whybray concludes that "the book of Proverbs was compiled as a compendium of traditional educational or instructional material in order to gather on a single scroll all the writings of this kind," and its primary organizational principle was that of preservation. Whybray has a particular form-critical argument animating his view of the development of Proverbs into its final form, which cannot be

beauty in favor of acquired wisdom. The poem does so through a play on the same rhetorical device that manifests beauty, carefully embedding its message of willed action and acquired wisdom in the structure of the alphabetic acrostic. Through its literary artistry, the poem details the successive deeds of אשת חיל, the "Valiant Woman," showing how her deeds lead to the enduring success of her family, her community, and the subsequent generation.

Beauty and Totalizing Description as Praise

In a 2005 article, Victor Hurowitz offered a fresh perspective on the nature of the praise in Prov 31:10–31, comparing it to an Akkadian physiognomic omen text, *Šumma sinništu qaqqada rabât*, "If a Woman is Large of Head." The physiognomic text belongs to a collection of omens in which the woman's described physical appearance is linked to nonphysical characteristics or outcomes for the woman's future behavior.[6] For example, the size of a woman's hands are said to be indicative, in this text, of how she will run her household:[7]

šumma sinništum qātāša baʾlā	*bīt dulli ippuš*
If a woman's hands are abnormally large	she will build a house of labor/misery,
šumma qattanā	*muštamriṣat*
if they are small	she is a hypochondriac,
šumma arkā	*išarru ilānât*
if they are long	she will be rich, she is divine,
šumma karâ	*ulappan*
if they are short	she will be poor.

A comparison of this Akkadian omen text with Prov 31:10–31 highlights a shared rhetorical strategy: detailed, systematic description. In the omen text, the speaker's description of the subject is presented as exhaustive of physiological possibilities, moving from one extreme to another—in other words, the hands are large or small, long or short.[8] Because the presentational strategy aims toward a totality, I call this kind of description "totalizing." While the physiognomic text quoted above does

treated given the scope of the present article. Briefly stated, even with the view that a systematic redaction of the book took place, the evidence of the multiple titles within the book compounded with the distinct order and titles of the Septuagint advance the appearance, at the very least, of the book as an anthology of multiple collections and not a single composition (see R. N. Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs* [JSOTSup 168; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994] 157).

[6] Victor Hurowitz, "The Woman of Valor and a Woman Large of Head: Matchmaking in the Ancient Near East," in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday* (ed. Ronald L. Troxel, Kelvin G. Friebel, and Dennis Robert Magary; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005) 221–34.

[7] Translation by Hurowitz, ibid., 223: a selection from lines 100–103 of the Akkadian text. Edition, translation, and commentary of the text can be found in Barbara Böck, *Die babylonisch-assyrische Morphoskopie* (AfOB 27; Vienna: Institut für Orientalistik der Universität Wien, 2000) 148–73.

[8] See also the physiognomic texts from Qumran, 4Q186 (4QHoroscope) and 4Q561 (4Qhor ar). 4Q186 II 5–9, for example, describes one with long and slender thighs and toes as six parts in

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not move systematically from head to toe, as body description poems do, it does share a fundamental descriptive strategy with the head-to-toe description: it moves from one extreme to another. This strategy implies the whole without necessarily listing components between the one end and the other.[9]

The rhetorical strategy of totalizing description is at work in Song 4:1–7, in the lover's head-to-toe description of the poem's subject. There are four compositions in Song of Songs, conventionally identified as a *waṣf*, that conform to a similar strategy for describing physical attributes.[10] The composition in Song 4:1–7 moves from the woman's head downward, with a concluding statement of the totality of the description: "All of you is beautiful . . . not a blemish on you." The description of the male lover in Song 5:10–16 moves downward, then transitioning from the subject's legs (v. 15) back to the subject's mouth (v. 16), concluding "*All* of him is delightful." Song 7:1–9 describes the physical attributes of a subject likewise in a sequential manner but does so from bottom to top. Song 6:4–10 resumes much of the language and expressions in Song 4:1–7. Three of the four compositions open and close with a statement about the unique beauty of the poem's subject,[11] and one bears a concluding statement, consisting of four poetic lines, which opens with the declaration of beauty.[12] From this small sample, one might posit that such detailed accounts of the body aim at persuading the reader of the subject's total perfection.

Totalizing description in these texts are not only discourses of praise; they also manifest the value of beauty as corporeal wholeness or perfection. Similarly, Absalom is described in 2 Sam 14:25 as a "beautiful man," who was "Without blemish, from the sole of his foot to the top of his head." In Dan 1:4, the king orders elite Israelites to be brought before him, "Youths without a single blemish, of fine appearance." Beauty rarely privileges one single, stable set of values in

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the house of light, three parts in the house of darkness, born during the celestial season of Taurus, and destined to be poor.

[9] For a similar strategy in which a total description is implied but only the extremes are given, consider the narrator's description of Absalom's beauty in 2 Sam 14:25, discussed below.

[10] The use of this term in biblical scholarship for the literary form found in Song 4:1–7 and elsewhere is widespread. Nevertheless, its importation from a nonnative literary tradition should be acknowledged. In the Arabic literary tradition, the term designates the "minute, thorough description of certain objects," and this device is used across poetic genres but particularly in the *qasidah* genre. See Akiko Motoyoshi Sumi, *Description in Classical Arabic Poetry: Waṣf, Ekphrasis, and Interarts Theory* (Journal of Arabic Literature Supplements 25; Leiden: Brill, 2004) at 4–5 and 8. Where in medieval Arabic poetics the *waṣf* seems to be understood as a rhetorical device for simulating sensory transformation, from verbal to image, the biblical literary device may have other aims that do not correspond to those of the *waṣf*, such as persuasion. See, however, the application of Arabic poetic genre categories, including and beyond that of the *waṣf* in Scott B. Noegel and Gary A. Rendsburg, *Solomon's Vineyard*: *Literary and Linguistic Studies in the Song of Songs* (AIL 1; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009) 129–69. For a recent discussion of the resonance of sensual imagery and physical description between Song of Songs and Proverbs 1–9, see Anne W. Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs: Wisdom Literature and the Shaping of the Moral Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 61–69, esp. 61–62.

[11] Song 4:1, 7; 5:10, 16; 6:4, 10.

[12] Song 7:7–9.

any given culture at any given time, but it is clear that there exists a "perfection" or a "blemish-free" dimension to beauty as it is described in biblical literature.[13] Moreover, the frequent association of Hebrew יפי, "beauty," with other terms such as תאר, "form," and מראה, "appearance," indicate that יפי designates an externally evaluated state.[14]

Another example of totalizing description, examined in Victor Hurowitz's study, is a Hebrew text found in the Babylonian Talmud, in *Nedarim* 66b. In this text, a man vows that his wife will not sexually benefit from him until she can demonstrate that any aspect of herself is beautiful to R. Ishmael, son of R. Jose, who seems to be, in such a ridiculously hypothetical situation, serving as the judge. R. Ishmael appears to consult others to determine whether the woman, as a whole, might be judged "beautiful." R. Ishmael describes and evaluates the woman in parts, moving systematically from head to toe. In his evaluation, each body part is determined defective in some form: her hair has the appearance of "stalks of flax," her eyes are "bleared," her ears are "folded over," her nose is "obstructed," her lips are "thick," her neck is "stubby," her belly "protrudes," and her feet "are as broad as those of a duck."[15] Having failed to find a single nondefective physical attribute, R. Ishmael moves to evaluate the woman's name, which translates to "Repulsive." Such a list bears striking resemblance to the head-to-toe description in the Song of Songs, though it is actually an inversion of the expectation of praise.

Even more remarkable is the similarity of the description in *Nedarim* 66b to the Mesopotamian *Göttertypentext*, in which head-to-toe descriptions conclude with the entity's name.[16] In the Talmudic passage, the joke seems to be that R. Ishmael had indeed discovered something יפה, "perfect," in that the woman's name, "Repulsive," in his view perfectly accounted for her physical attributes. Here the rhetorical strategy is turned on its head, for its usual purpose seems to be to demonstrate praiseworthiness through corporeal perfection. But in this case, the perfection is the perceived correspondence of the woman's physical attributes to her name.

[13] For the operation of this concept in the Priestly source, see Jeremy Schipper and Jeffrey Stackert, "Blemishes, Camouflage, and Sanctuary Service: The Priestly Deity and His Attendants," *HBAI* 2 (2013) 458–78.

[14] See H. Ringgren, "*Yāpâ*," *TDOT* 6:218–20 at 218. For beauty with *tōʾar*, "form," see Gen 29:17; 39:6; 41:18; Deut 21:11; 1 Sam 25:3; Esth 2:7. For beauty with *marʾeh*, "appearance," see Gen 12:11; 29:17; 39:6; 41:2, 4; 1 Sam 17:42; 2 Sam 14:27.

[15] The translation, quoted in Hurowitz, "Woman of Valor," 231, was produced by Mark Geller, "West Meets East: Early Greek and Babylonian Diagnosis," *AfO* 48/49 (2001/2002) 72–73.

[16] See Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "Imperial Allegories: Divine Agency and Monstrous Bodies in Mesopotamia's Body Description Texts," in *The Materiality of Divine Agency* (ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten and Karen Sonik; Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 8; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015) 119–41 esp. 125–27. According to Pongratz-Leisten, this term was coined by Carl Bezold, "Über keilschriftliche Beschreibungen babylonisch-assyrischer Göttertypen," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Voderasiatische Archäologie* 9 (1894) 114–25, at 114, and adopted by Franz Köcher, "Der babylonische Göttertypentext," *MIOF* 1 (1953) 57–95. Another related category of Mesopotamian texts discussed by Pongratz-Leisten is the *Body Description Texts*, which, unlike the *Göttertypentext*, do not follow a systematic order (from head to toe).

If the aim of the describing poem is to demonstrate the subject's observed flawlessness, a head-to-toe (or toe-to-head) examination of physical features might be rhetorically effective.[17] Similarly, the seemingly exact, totalizing description functions to demonstrate perfection in the Priestly account of creation and ordering of the cosmos (Gen 1:1–2:4a), the construction of the tabernacle (Exod 25–31), and the human body (Lev 12–15), as well as that of the creatures in Ezekiel's vision (Ezek 1) and of Tyre as a ship (Ezek 27).[18] Other body-descriptions, reminiscent of the Mesopotamian *Göttertypentext*, can be found in biblical literature. One notable example is the description of Leviathan in Job 41, which concludes with a totalizing statement: "He is king over *all* prideful creatures."

Totalizing description, or what Seth Sanders identifies as "exact description" in his study of the language of knowledge in Enoch and Priestly Hebrew, is a rhetorical strategy used by biblical authors to claim the perfection of an entity.[19] On initial examination, the poem in Prov 31:10–31 seems to argue the opposite of what is claimed in the body descriptions in Song of Songs. Those poems detail passive, external features of a body to claim its perfection, while the description of the woman in Prov 31:10–31 focuses entirely on her deeds. Upon closer reading, however, one sees that a focus on her deeds is precisely the point. The poem presents a detailed description of the woman's actions instead of her passive features.

The description in Prov 31:10–31 begins with a summary statement of her value (v. 10b) and the effect of this value, as behavior, on her husband's accumulated success (v. 11b). Her value, or perhaps the price paid for her, was high, but the return on investment justifies the value. What follows this summary statement is a description of the woman's deeds in a systematic fashion that details the return on the husband's investment. She seeks out and works raw materials (v. 13); she seeks out a network for commerce (v. 14); she works even when the rest of the household is at rest to provide for their basic needs (v. 15); she seeks out land and plants the seeds for future harvests (v. 16); she does all this in a manner that ensures the continuity of the investment (vv. 17–18). This first half of the poem represents the investment, not only the husband's in the woman but the woman's investment in raw materials and labor for future gains—gains that will turn out in the second half of the poem not only to be material but also to add to the family's enduring reputation. The description continues after the mirror structure in vv.

[17] For the use of this rhetorical strategy in ritual texts, see David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (SBLDS 101; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 154.

[18] Seth L. Sanders understands the Priestly descriptions of the cosmos, temple, and human body to demonstrate a native "science": "a system of exact knowledge of the physical world." See "'I Was Shown Another Calculation' (חשבון אחרן אחזית): The Language of Knowledge in Aramaic Enoch and Priestly Hebrew," in *Ancient Jewish Sciences and the History of Knowledge in Second Temple Literature* (ed. Jonathan Ben-Dov and Seth L. Sanders; New York: Institute for the Study of the Ancient World; New York: New York University Press, 2014). See also Baruch Halpern, "The Assyrian Astronomy of Genesis 1 and the Birth of Milesian Philosophy," *ErIsr* 27 (2003) 74–83.

[19] Sanders, "'I Was Shown Another Calculation.'"

19–20, with the praiseworthy effects of her deeds on her family and the promise of the continuity of her work. Because of her work, her family experiences safety and luxury (v. 21); her outward appearance indicates her success (v. 22); her husband gains prominence through her deeds (v. 23); she continues to build upon her success, moving from survival and safety to surplus and profit (v. 24); those qualities of strength and persistence she had striven toward in v. 17 become her actual self-presentation and persona among others (v. 25), ensuring continual future success. Finally, the development of the woman's deeds results not only in material success, reputation, and future stability; the outcome of her deeds is also actualized in instruction (v. 26), which she offers to the future generation, in word and in deed (v. 27). It is this next generation, and the entire household, including the husband who acquired her in the first place, who attest to her praiseworthiness (vv. 28–29). The description concludes with a summary statement of the many daughters sought in marriage who perform valorously and with the required strength, but this one, according to her household, has surpassed them all (v. 29). This is the ideal of the return on investment—materially and conceptually—in deeds that lead one down the path for future success.

This detailed description, like a head-to-toe description, is a totalizing one. In this case, the description is not of the woman's external features but instead details the full scope of her deeds—those required for survival, safety, success, and intergenerational posterity. The description evaluates these deeds in their logical unfolding throughout the poem as praiseworthy, concluding with the quoted speech of her husband in v. 29. One might expect a husband to praise the beauty of his bride, from head to toe, but in this case, it is only deeds and their outcomes that earn his praise. The poem upends the expectations of descriptive poems in order to advance an argument against passive, inborn beauty.[20] A comparison of the descriptive praise of the woman in Prov 31:10–31 to the descriptive praise of Sarai's beauty in the Genesis Apocryphon will demonstrate this point. By subverting its very literary form, the poem in Prov 31:10–31 argues against the praiseworthiness of innate beauty and in favor of wisdom acquired through correct action.

[20] Relatedly, Fox states that, in determining the poem's classification within the literary culture, "we should look for a category that is not so broad as to be useless ('poetry') or so narrow as to have only a couple of known members ('poems in praise of capable women'). The purpose of the poem will be an expression of its genre" (Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 902).

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Prov 31:10–31 as a Totalizing Description of Handiwork

The poem in Prov 31:10–31 has been characterized as a "final masterful portrait of Wisdom," and even as "a series of disjointed descriptions . . . much like an impressionistic painting."[21] And yet, while the alphabetic acrostic illustrates its feminine subject in a flurry of activity, the poem explicitly resists a portrait of the woman's appearance—a decisive move against the kind of praise descriptions of the lovers' bodies in Song of Songs. When we arrive at the conclusion of the poem, the categorical resistance against beauty that was previously implicit is now explicit. Beauty is not a virtue; its lasting value is dwarfed by that of the wisdom-acquisition system promoted throughout Proverbs, "the fear of Yahweh."[22]

In the Genesis Apocryphon (1QapGen XX, 2–8), we find, as in Song 4:1–7, a totalizing description of Sarai's physical features, a praise of perfection from head to toe.[23] The description is a response to the tradition narrated in Gen 12:15 that Pharaoh's ministers are said to have *praised* Sarai's appearance. There are two unusual and interconnected features of this head-to-toe praise that distinguish it from what might be otherwise a simple totalizing praise of Sarai's beauty. First, the poem is centered thematically and structurally on her hands. In fact, more space is dedicated in the poem to Sarai's hands than to any other single feature: two poetic units, five poetic lines. These poetic units are located roughly at the center of the poem:

> As for her arms, how beautiful,
> And her hands, how perfect,
> Rousing is every part of her han[d]s.
> How shapely are her palms,
> how long and delicate are all the fingers of her hands.[24]

[21] Thomas P. McCreesh, "Wisdom as a Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31," *RB* 92 (1985) 25–46, at 30; Christine Roy Yoder, "The Woman of Substance (אשת חיל): A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10–31," *JBL* 122 (2003) 427–47, at 427–28.

[22] Yoder, among numerous other commentators, observes that "the fear of Yahweh" is the "resounding refrain" of the book (see *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 107). See also Crawford Howell Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (ICC 16; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899) 10–11; Julius H. Greenstone, *Proverbs: With Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1950) xiii; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 18; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965) 23. Yoder understands the phrase to be "an idiom for religious piety" (*Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 106), where I see the phrase to represent the basic attitude of a wisdom-seeker towards behavior: one "fears" or "is in awe of" the divine system of cause and effect whereby one might learn from one's missteps through punishment—as discipline—and thereby refine and optimize one's actions to reap the greatest rewards. See discussion below.

[23] Wolfram Herrmann identified 1QapGen XX, 2–8 as a "description poem" (Beschreibungslied) ("Gedanken zur Geschichte des altorientalischen Beschreibungsliedes," *ZAW* 75 [1963] 176–97, at 195–96). The *editio princeps* was published by Nahman Avigad and Yigael Yadin, *A Genesis Apocryphon: A Scroll from the Wilderness of Judaea* (Jerusalem: Magnes and Hekal ha-Sefer, 1956).

[24] Lines 4–5.

More significantly, the concluding statement of the poem goes beyond her stated superlative beauty—"Of all the women her beauty exceeds, with her beauty she surpasses them all"[25]—and connects her beauty to her wisdom. The statement does so with a play on the semantics of the phrase ודלידיהא, literally, "that which is of her hands," but grammaticalized in an expression of possession or authority, "all that is hers":

> And with all this beauty, she possesses great wisdom,
> and that which is of her hands is beautiful.[26]

The poem explicitly connects Sarai's beauty to her wisdom, using her hands—the bodily organ representative of her agency—as the rhetorical link between the two. Sarai's physical appearance is beautiful, perfect, linked to her wisdom and, ultimately, indicative of her capacity to produce and possess beauty.[27] This link is simply stated as Sarai's two central virtues. The poem in the Genesis Apocryphon does not further reflect upon or refine a connection between beauty and wisdom.

Upon closer reading, one notices that the poem in Prov 31:10–31 is also centered on the subject's hands but for a different reason than Sarai's praise in the Genesis Apocryphon. In Prov 31:10–31, the thematic, lexical, and structural focus on hands is in service of highlighting the woman's active deeds, not the perfection of her passive features. This argument is supported by two significant observations of the poem's organization. The first observation is that the only poetic structure within the poem that forms a mirror pattern of ABB'A', vv. 19–20, pivots on the two primary words used in the poem for the woman's hands in action, יד, "hand," and כף, "palm": "*Her hands*, she sends out to the distaff, *her palms* grasp the spindle; *her palm*, she spreads out to the poor, *her hands*, she sends out to the needy."[28] This

[25] Lines 6–7. See Muraoka's comment on clarifying the feminine subject of the adjective עליא as Sarai and thus to be translated "With respect to her beauty, she is higher than them all"), "A Recent Re-edition of the 'Genesis Apocryphon,'" *RevQ* 25 [2011] 307–26, at 325).

[26] Lines 7–8.

[27] Muraoka argues that the author of Genesis Apocryphon "identif[ied] 'the virtuous woman' of *Proverbs* 31 with Sarai, as did the midrash Tanḥuma in the section of 'the Life of Sarah.'" Muraoka understands the explicit link between beauty and "handiwork," domestic skills, at the end of the poem praising Sarai's beauty as a deliberate engagement with the conclusion of Prov 31:10–31. Muraoka's translation, and thereby his understanding of the engagement with Prov 31:10–31, is distinct from the approach of the present study. He translates lines 7–8 as "With all this beauty she has plenty of skill and all her handiwork is pretty," a translation that distances the obvious connections made between "handiwork," agency, and wisdom in the Prov 31:10–31 poem (see Takamitsu Muraoka, "Further Notes on the Aramaic of the 'Genesis Apocryphon,'" *RevQ* 16 [1993] 39–48, at 45–46). It seems, however, that if the author is indeed engaging with Prov 31:10–31, one cannot neglect the clear wisdom context of that praise of אשת חיל and, consequently, the praise of Sarai's wisdom here, too.

[28] Fox observes the fact that both the *yod* and *kaf* lines coincide with the two words for "hand" and "palm" operative in the poem but concludes that they are an "accidental semantic link," without attention to the fact that these words recur throughout the poem (vv. 13, 16, 19 [x2], 20 [x2]), and at the very end (v. 31), not including a near synonym for "hand" in v. 17, "her arms" (see Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 895). Aside from "mouth," its parallel, "tongue," in v. 26, and "loins," in v. 17—arguably all "productive" organs of the body—no other parts of the woman's body are mentioned.

mirror pattern concentrates on the juxtaposed "B" elements, "*her palms* grasp the spindle," and "*her palm*, she spreads out to the poor," with their distinct activities. The distinction is further highlighted by the fact that in the "A" elements the same verb is used ("she sends out"), though for different activities. By contrast, in the "B" elements of the line, the verbs used are clearly distinct: the woman's *palms* are engaged in work within the household, and *her palm* (singular) extends her deeds to those beyond the realm of her responsibility, respectively.

The second observation supporting an argument that the poem focuses explicitly on the woman's deeds as opposed to her passive, external features, is that the relevant elements of this mirror structure, "hands" and "palms"—along with the other "active" body part, her mouth, פה—function for both their semantic content and as the proper names for their representative letters in the alphabet. The terms "hands" and "palms," both as lexemes for hands and as the proper names for the letters of the alphabet, open their respective lines in the poem (vv. 19, 20, and 26).[29] The rhetorical strategy of totalizing description—the head-to-toe scan of the subject's body parts, as in Song 4:1–7—prioritizes external, passive, inborn unblemished beauty. Through a totalizing description of the deeds of the woman in Prov 31:10–31, this rhetorical device is reimagined. The illustration of the woman's actions raises the value of active, learned wisdom *above* passive, natural beauty.

The poem focuses on the woman's hands as agents of productivity. In v. 13, she produces material objects—cloth—with the willingness of her hands: "She seeks out wool and flax, she produces with *willing hands*."[30] In v. 16, the figurative fruits—the products—of her handiwork enable her to generate future actual fruit: "She considers a plot of land and buys it, from the *fruit of her hands* she plants a vineyard." A variation on the phrase in v. 16, "from the fruit of her hands," appears in the concluding line of the poem, v. 31, calling on the readers to praise her for her labors, "for the *fruit of her hands*."

Even the introduction of so-called militaristic imagery in v. 17 mentions neither יד nor כף but rather the term זרוע, "arm," a term evocative of the woman's productivity and perhaps even procreativity: "She girds her loins with strength, she steadies her arms." In the context of a superlative wife, militaristic imagery might seem out of place; however, the description recalls the militaristic connotations of her moniker at the outset of the poem, אשת חיל, a "valiant woman."[31] More playfully,

[29] F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp concludes that acrostics are primarily visual, that "they are predicated on an explicitly graphic conceit . . . composed for the eye" (see *On Biblical Poetry* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015] 43). One might nuance this conclusion with this particular use of the acrostic in Prov 31:10–31. Here, the alphabetic scheme of the acrostic figures into the content and even broader meaning of the poem.

[30] Following the Hebrew, "by the will of her hands."

[31] Some examples of usage of the term in various phrases: See Deut 11:4 (Egyptian "army"); גבור חיל as "warrior" in Josh 6:2; 8:3; 10:7; Judg 6:12; 11:1; 1 Sam 9:1; 16:18; also the direct lexical equivalent to אשת חיל, "woman of valor," "valiant woman," as איש חיל, "man of valor," "valiant man," plural in Gen 47:6; also "capable" in Exod 18:21, 25; Ruth 2:1 ("capable," "of means"); "warriors"

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the description of her girding of her loins introduces a new, yet unmentioned, part of the woman's body, and it is placed in parallel with "her arms" but perhaps also recalling another sense of the root of זרע, "seed."[32]

Hands—or palms, or arms—are the only part of the woman's body to make multiple appearances in the poem. The phrase "her hands" appears three times, and at significant points: twice in the only mirror structure of the poem (vv. 19–20), falling roughly in the center of the composition, and once in the concluding line (v. 31). The phrase "her palms" appears three times and the singular "her palm" once: these phrases occur twice in the first half of the poem (vv. 13, 16) and twice in the mirror structure (vv. 19–20).[33]

The Poem's Message in the Alphabetic Acrostic

The most compelling description of the woman's active hands in the poem comes at the placement of the mirror pattern in vv. 19–20. Here, the theme of "hands," woven through the fabric of the poem, is folded seamlessly into the alphabetic acrostic, one of the poem's structuring devices. In the alphabetic scheme, vv. 19 and 20 open with sequential letters, *yod* and *kaf*, letters whose names correspond precisely to the initial words of the poetic units themselves: ידיה, "her hands," and כפה, "her palm." The mirrored arrangement of these verses fuses the precise focus of the poem's praise—the generative nature of the woman's skill—with the alphabetic acrostic:

> Her hands,[34] she sends out to the distaff,
> her palms grasp the spindle,
> her palm, she spreads out to the poor,
> her hands, she sends out to the needy.

in Judg 20:44, 46; 2 Sam 11:16; Jer 48:14; Nah 2:4; Ps 76:6; singular in Judg 3:29; 1 Sam 31:12; 2 Sam 24:9; 1 Kgs 1:42 ("capable, worthy").

[32] Note the militaristic imagery in the depiction of the woman's beauty in the two poetic units in Song 4:4. One might posit a connection between beauty and victory along the same lines as a conventional view of wisdom, all three as indications of divine favor.

[33] The concentration of terms for "hand" in Prov 31:10–31 appears all the more significant when compared to the relatively sparse number of occurrences of the terms throughout the book of Proverbs: the terms יד and כף occur a total of 7 times in the 22 verses of Prov 31:10–31 and a total of 33 in the entirety of the remaining 893 verses of Proverbs.

[34] Some translations have distinguished between יד and כף in v. 19, e.g., "hand . . . fingers" (NIV, NJPS), "πήχεις . . . χεῖρας (arms . . . hands)" (LXX), "*manum* . . . *digiti* (hand . . . fingers)" (Vulg.); others have not, e.g., "hands . . . hands" (NRSV, NASB). Yet, even those translations that distinguish between *yād* and *kap* in v. 19 fail to preserve the mirrored arrangement when they render v. 20: "hand . . . fingers . . . arms . . . hands" (NIV), "*manum* . . . *digiti* . . . *manum* . . . *palmas*" (Vulg.). The chiastic arrangement of יד and כף is made even more obscure in LXX and NJPS in v. 20: καρπὸν δὲ ἐξέτεινεν πτωχῷ, "she extends fruit to the poor" (v. 20b LXX); "She gives generously to the poor" (v. 20a NJPS). In Tg. the chiastic arrangement of of יד and כף is obscured: "her hands . . . her palms . . . her hands . . . her arms."

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The content of the mirror pattern in vv. 19–20 highlights a division in the content of the poem as well.[35] One might thematically divide the poem as follows:

I. vv. 10–12
   Introductory statement of the acquisition of אשת חיל and her praiseworthy qualities
II. vv. 13–19
   Productive action benefiting the household and its survival
III. vv. 20–29
   Productive action increasing the reputation of the household
IV. vv. 30–31
   The subordination of beauty to wisdom

As detailed above, the first half of the mirror pattern, v. 19, describes generative action beneficial for the woman's own continued productivity and accumulation of wealth: her hands are engaged in the task of shaping raw materials to produce cloth. Likewise, the section that v. 19 concludes, vv. 13–18, describes productive action centered on the subsistence of her family: preparing materials for cloth production (v. 13); feeding her household (vv. 14–15); establishing a transgenerational source of wealth (v. 16). She demonstrates strength (v. 17) and determination (v. 18) to continue producing. Verse 19, with its resumption of the theme of cloth production, thus forms an *inclusio* with the beginning of the section at v. 13.[36]

The second half of the mirror pattern, v. 20, describes actions that reach beyond subsistence, to the development of one's reputation in the community: her hands reach out to the economically marginalized.[37] Along these lines, the second half of the woman's activities in the poem, vv. 21–29, describe productive actions that build her reputation within the family and without: both she and her family are well dressed (vv. 21–22); her husband establishes a reputation (v. 23); she engages in trade (v. 24); she establishes herself as sufficiently knowledgeable to offer instruction (v. 26); she observes the correct behavior of those in her household,

[35] Murray H. Lichtenstein, "Chiasm and Symmetry in Proverbs 31," *CBQ* 44 (1982) 202–11, at 206–7.

[36] Similar to the *inclusio* formed in the subsection of the descriptive poem in Song 4:1–7 in vv. 1b–3b with the repeated phrase "from behind your veil."

[37] Yoder describes two ways to understand the conceptual link between the woman's handcrafting industry in v. 19 and her hands-on charity in v. 20. First, the woman's productive industry finances her charitable endeavors. Second, when considered in light of a Persian-period socioeconomic context, the woman's business savvy enables her to function as a creditor to the poor: "the work of the Woman's hands with the poor is a 'business'—yet another opportunity to increase her earnings" (*Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 88–89). Fox raises the objection that such enterprising is exploitive (cf. Exod 22:24; Lev 25:36–37; Deut 23:19–20; Ezek 18:8, 13, 17; 22:12; Neh 5:9–12), and even still, a more profitable venture would seek to lend to the rich (*Proverbs 10–31*, 895–96). Given the thematic focus on the positive development of the woman's reputation, and that of her family, that begins in v. 20, such exploitative measures would seem to undermine the woman's positive evaluation in the eyes of the community. Relatedly, see Ps 15, where the blameless and righteous person despises the scornful one in his eyes but honors those who fear Yahweh (v. 4) and does not lend with interest (v. 5).

and the quality of her products is a testament to this (v. 27); her children and her husband speak praise (v. 28), and in their words (v. 29) she has not only lived up to her moniker, "a valiant woman," she has exceeded it.

The mirror pattern in vv. 19–20 outlines this thematic division in the description of the woman's activities. Other repetitions between sections reinforce the division between the description of actions benefiting the survival of her household (vv. 13–19) and the description of actions going beyond survival, toward the development of good reputation (vv. 20–29). The "bread" of v. 14 that she brings from afar, and the food she gives to her household in v. 15 is, in the second half of the poem, not only sustenance but a mark of the quality of the production of the household: "She observes the ways of her household, she does not eat the bread of idleness." In the first half of the poem, in v. 17, she girds herself "with strength," but in the second half of the poem the very qualities of strength *and* splendor have become her clothing, that is, her externally observed characteristics. Whereas in the first half of the poem (v. 17) she girds herself, in the second half (v. 24) she has a surplus girdle to sell to a merchant.

Further, the mirror pattern in vv. 19–20 highlights the subtle shift in the woman's activities in the first and second halves of the description: from those enabling the survival of her household to those indicating her social success beyond mere subsistence. The poem's structural features—the repeated mention of her hands and the integration of this theme into the alphabetic acrostic—render the praise of the woman's handiwork a primary focus. Unlike the praise of Sarai's beauty in Genesis Apocryphon, Prov 31:10–31 describes the woman only for her actions; any mention of her body—her hands and, in v. 26, her mouth—is subordinate to these actions. In this ideal depiction of a woman with the correct attitude, her hands are instruments of successful action, and her mouth functions solely to articulate instruction for others to succeed. Perhaps the reformulation of the praise-through-description plays on the semantics of the term חכמה itself. The term designates *both* the skill of one's hands, that is, an artisan (Bezalel, for example), *and* the skill of speech and knowledge, that is, articulating correct action.

Decoupling Beauty and Wisdom

In biblical narrative, wisdom and beauty are frequently represented as divine gifts, and sometimes these qualities are observed by narrators together.[38] In Daniel, wisdom is described alongside beauty. In Daniel 1, the king orders his chief officer to bring Israelites of royal descent and nobility:[39] "Youths without a single blemish, of fair appearance, intelligent in every skill, knowledgeable and discerning." What connects beauty and wisdom in such narratives? One might posit that these

[38] For example, God gives wisdom to Solomon in 1 Kgs 3, after which the oft-cited consequences of wisdom—length of days and material wealth—are also bestowed upon him as a reward for his selection of wisdom.

[39] Dan 1:4.

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qualities are listed together because they are both external manifestations of divine favor. Similarly, Abigail is described in 1 Sam 25:3 as "intelligent and beautiful." Intellectual capacity and beauty, at least in these stories, are not the same.[40] They are distinct characteristics that manifest differently from one another. But beauty and wisdom share one specific quality: they are both divine gifts, natural to those who possess them.[41]

Bezalel's חכמה ("wisdom, skill"), along with the skill of others, is explicitly described as a divine gift.[42] In Gen 39, Joseph is successful because, as the narrator tells us, others observed that "Yahweh was with him": his wisdom is attributed to divine favor. In Dan 1:17, Daniel's and his friends' wisdom is described explicitly as a divine gift. The praise poem, which Daniel utters after the mystery of the king's dream, is revealed in Dan 2:20–23 prioritizes a statement attributing wisdom and agency ultimately belonging to God and only available to Daniel as a result of a divine gift. In 1 Kgs 3, Solomon is offered a gift of his choice from the deity. Solomon admits the limitations of his competence and age, as well as the enormity of the task before him, and asks for wisdom of the most basic sense: "an attentive mind," capable of hearing legal disputes, whose primary function is "to distinguish between good and bad."[43] God tells Solomon that because he had selected well, he will be rewarded, "according to his request," with superior knowledge—"a wise and discerning mind"—and the deity then articulates the uniqueness of Solomon's intellectual gifts.[44]

Yet in Proverbs, understanding and discernment are not inborn qualities but skills acquired through a process. These skills, according to the various instructions, are developed through attentiveness to instruction and its discipline. This process is advertised by the work's frame itself, in Prov 1:1–22:16 and its conclusion in Prov 31:10–31.[45] Even those who possess wisdom have yet skills to acquire, according

[40] Beauty and skill as divine gifts appear together in 1 Sam 16:18. Here, one of Saul's servants praises David's musical skill and physical beauty to the disturbed king, yet this description comes only after David is anointed by the prophet Samuel and endowed by God's "spirit" (v. 13).

[41] While חכמה refers broadly to a mastery of some area of knowledge, the virtue is construed as having a divine origin. For example, Pharaoh recognizes God as Joseph's divine informant and concludes that "there is no one as discerning and wise as you" (Gen 41:39); God bestows to Solomon "a wise and discerning mind" (1 Kgs 3:12); Isaiah's messianic figure will receive "the 'spirit' of Yahweh," which is defined as "the 'spirit' of wisdom and discernment" (Isa 11:2); and Daniel has a reputation for having "wisdom like that of the gods" (Dan 5:11). See *TDOT* 4:364–85; *TLOT* 1:418–24.

[42] Exod 36:1–2.

[43] 1 Kgs 3:9.

[44] 1 Kgs 3:12.

[45] Prov 1:1–22:16 contain two sections, if we are to use titles of sections as they occur in the MT as an indication of section or collection division; following MT, these sections would be Prov 1–9 and 10:1–22:16. In LXX, there is no title in Prov 10:1 as there is in the MT. Following both textual traditions, one could identify the maximal, stable frame of Proverbs as Prov 1:1–22:16 and Prov 31:10–31. I do not maintain that there is any historical priority to any section; rather, I simply observe that Prov 1:1–22:16 and 31:10–31 frame the received forms of both MT and LXX Proverbs.

to Prov 1:5: "The wise one will hear (instruction) and will pile on teaching(s), the discerning one will acquire strategies."

If a single overarching message can be teased out of the book of Proverbs and its manifold, often contradictory instructions for and observations of human behavior and the world, this message is that wisdom is *acquired*.[46] This is not, of course, to deny that wisdom is described as a divine gift throughout Proverbs, or that wisdom is transmitted through parental instruction.[47] Rather, the point is that in its various calls to readers, Proverbs implores its audience to attend to its discourse and through it to acquire wisdom. This message, that wisdom is acquired through attentiveness to the words of the work itself, forms a basic argument for the work's ontology, a necessary articulation for the book's self-justification. Why else attend to its words if through them one cannot acquire wisdom? One might therefore read the concluding poem in Prov 31:10–31 as a final call to value the willed *acquisition* of wisdom over other divine gifts that one need not work toward, like beauty. Wisdom, through this perspective, is a set of skills acquired through fidelity to a humble outlook that devotes itself to the system of cause and effect and the limitations placed on human knowledge, i.e., "the fear of Yahweh."

Yet in Prov 31:10–31, "wisdom" as an abstract category makes a seemingly unremarkable appearance. The woman described is not personified Wisdom of Proverbs 1–9. Her tasks are performed skillfully, but they are all too human, all too pedestrian to be within the purview of Woman Wisdom, who tells the reader in Proverbs 8 that she was with God at creation.[48] In v. 31 when חכמה, "wisdom," emerges from the woman's mouth, it is in parallel with her "instruction of devotion." Here, "wisdom" is explicitly speech and, in the progress of the woman's

Any piece of the anthology could have been composed in any period in which such texts could reasonably have been composed with the necessary scribal skills for embarking on such a project. The present form does not necessitate any historical order to the book's arrangement; a frame can be composed before or after any other section.

[46] William Brown argues that Proverbs elicits a "progression," that is, an increase in the complexity of the literary forms ("The Pedagogy of Proverbs 10:1–31:9," in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* [ed. W. P. Brown; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 200]) 150–82). This idea is taken up by Christine Yoder in "Forming 'Fearers of Yahweh': Repetition and Contradiction as Pedagogy in Proverbs," in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients* (ed. Troxel, Friebel, and Magary), 167–83. Anne W. Stewart builds on Brown's work to claim that the purpose of Proverbs as a work is "the cultivation of wisdom and the formation of wise character in its student," not only through its content but, notably, through its poetic form (Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs*, 2). These studies, however, do not explicitly admit the form of Proverbs as an anthological work—whether this anthology is a matter of the work's complex literary history or its deliberate artifactual shaping—in the claim that the "progression" of the work follows the "progression" of character development.

[47] For example, wisdom is described as a divine gift in Prov 2:6, and throughout Prov 1–9 wisdom is transmitted from fathers to sons.

[48] Prov 8:22–31. Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes, "Prov 31:10 . . . describe[s] a wife who is the very personification of earthly practical wisdom." See "The Sage in the Pentateuch: Soundings," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. G. Gammie and L. G. Perdue; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 275–88, at 282.

development through action, something that advises others on their actions. The poem's focus is on deeds and their contribution to success. Wisdom is the verbal instruction of these skills, to others, which follows the success of these deeds. It is an entire system of correct attitude and skill acquisition that is being described and praised in the poem, and it is this system of correct attitude and generative skill that the poem prioritizes over beauty. In selecting virtues, that one should select the system of wisdom-acquisition over beauty is a statement of the relative value of these two categories. Is beauty still configured here as a divine gift? No such statement is offered: the nature of beauty is not theorized other than as a statement cautioning against its preference. Beauty is, however, distinguished from wisdom and its benefits: while beauty has no lasting effects, correct, effective actions build upon one another, leading ultimately to one's praise.

The book of Proverbs is framed as advice addressed to young men. Likewise, the alphabetic acrostic in Prov 31:10–31 seems to be addressed to an audience *other* than those who would model themselves after this woman.[49] Based on its opening in v. 10, "A valiant wife, that one might acquire!" and its conclusion, the poem appears to be addressed to young men who would be in a position to make such a choice. Thus the poem is not only a praise of the poem's subject and her actions.[50] The poem is also a praise of the correct attitude in making choices. In this sense, the ideal to be emulated is identical in Ps 1 and Prov 31:10–31. In both poems, the ideal man selects a "correct path"—whether this path is the general "instruction of Yahweh" (Ps 1:2) or a wife whose primary quality is the specific, disciplining aspect of the educational process, "Fear of Yahweh."[51] One might

[49] The poem's conclusion shifts from third-person observation of the woman's behavior (vv. 12–27), to the praise of the woman's husband and children addressed to the woman in second person (v. 29), to the third person observation of general relationships between attitude, choice, and outcome (vv. 30–31).

[50] Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 903–4. Fox identifies Prov 31:10–31 as more or less equivalent to the Greek *encomium*, distinguishing between the general category of *encomium* and the more specific subcategory of macarism, which "depict[s] an ideal to be emulated and tell[s] of the blessing such a one enjoys." Fox lists Ps 1, 112, and 128 as macarisms. However, it is not clear that Prov 31:10–31 is to be interpreted as "an ideal to be emulated," at least according to its frame within the poem and without. See also Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 350.

[51] Toy suggested that the text in Prov 31:30 be emended to reflect a supposedly earlier, nonpietistic formulation (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 548–49). Subsequent studies have understood the phrase "Fear of Yahweh" to reflect pious views. See, for example, Whybray, *Composition of the Book of Proverbs*. The idea that the phrase is pious and therefore out of place in a "nonreligious" portrait of the feminine subject seems anachronistic. In Proverbs, the phrase relates to an aspect of the acquisition of wisdom. The phrase is parallel in 1:7 to "wisdom and discipline" and is described as "the first (part) of knowledge." In a variation on this, in 9:10, "Fear of Yahweh" is the beginning of "wisdom." In 1:29 it is parallel to "knowledge" and is something that is selected (like a wife): "because they didn't select fear of Yahweh." The phrase describes, in 2:5, something to be understood or discerned, parallel to "knowledge of God," which is acquired. "Fear of Yahweh" is described in 15:33 as "the discipline of wisdom," as also articulated in 22:4. The phrase describes an instruction through punishment, bringing about humility on those who accept the instruction. A

conclude that Prov 31:10–31 is a praise of the "happy man" who makes correct choices. This praise, however, is disguised by a more encompassing layer of the praise of the feminine subject of the poem, which takes the form of description of the woman's deeds. And as we have seen, praise-through-description, particularly that of a woman, seems to be associated with a judgment of the subject's surpassing beauty and assumed worthiness.

Thus, it is possible to read the poem superficially as advice to young men on how to choose a wife properly: one should select a wife who adheres to the guiding assumption of the system of cause and effect, learning from mistakes and remaining in "fear" of the punishment that inevitably follows missteps. This reading, however, would disregard the poem's place as the conclusion to the book of Proverbs—a bookend to a curated anthology of knowledge of proper behavior and cultivated wisdom. To this end, the poem articulates the nature of abstract categories and defines the relationship between these categories.[52]

In v. 30, beauty is identified as an abstract category and diminished as a virtue: it is deceptive and short lived. This redefinition of beauty reconnects the poem with various negative depictions of women (adulteresses) in Proverbs 1–9 whose attractiveness is seductive, yet this attractiveness conceals their danger.[53] While personified Woman Wisdom and her virtues are described in Proverbs 1–9,[54] no balancing illustrations of positive *human* women are offered. Proverbs 31:10–31 provides the positive human counterpoint to these depictions and balances the

similar articulation of this sense of the phrase is offered by Yoder, "Forming 'Fearers of Yahweh,'" 183. This is the same ideology Eliphaz rehearses for Job in 5:17. "Fear of Yahweh" is lifesaving (Prov 10:27; 14:27; 19:23) not only for one's own life but for future generations (14:26). To describe the phrase "Fear of Yahweh" as a "pious statement" understates its role within the wisdom system as described in Proverbs. It is a statement of the fear of divine punishment that prevents one from making a potentially fatal misstep.

[52] In the words of F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "Literature and the arts have always been a culture's principal means for developing, modifying, and re-imagining what it values" (see "The Delight of Beauty and Song of Songs 4:1–7," *Int* 59 [2005] 260–77, at 261).

[53] Prov 2:16–19; 6:24–35; 7:1–27; 9:13–18. See the landmark study by Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985). See also Athalya Brenner, "Some Observations on the Figurations of Woman in Wisdom Literature," in *Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages: Essays in Honour of R. Norman Whybray on his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Heather A. McKay and David J. A. Clines; JSOTSup 162; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 192–208, particularly the first section of this essay, titled "Female Figurations in Proverbs," where Brenner makes the important point that Proverbs is bookended by figurations of women.

[54] See Claudia V. Camp, "Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration," in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.* (ed. Kenneth G. Hoglund et al.; JSOTSup 58; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 45–76, and Carol Newsom, "Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1–9," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy Day; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 142–60. See, more recently, Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) 48–58.

gap created by the depictions of Proverbs 1–9.[55] More to the point, the concluding statement on beauty renders this category subordinate to another virtue: not "wisdom" exactly but rather the system of wisdom-acquisition as a whole.

In its very form, the poem in Prov 31:10–31 plays on the values embedded in the rhetorical device of totalizing description—praises of bodily perfection, such as those found in Song 4:1–7 or of Sarai in the Genesis Apocryphon. The alphabetic acrostic concluding Proverbs plays on the form of the totalizing description in order to decouple beauty from wisdom. Using the literary device through which beauty is exemplified as passive and innate, Prov 31:10–31 promotes active, honed skill in its stead. In the broadest sense, the poem can be read as a summary statement of Proverbs's epistemology. As Prov 4:7 states, the skill of knowledge is acquired, not bestowed: "The first part of wisdom is—acquire wisdom!" Wisdom is honed through attentiveness to the instructions of the anthology themselves. It is therefore surprising, in light of the reading presented here, that Solomon—the biblical character most *gifted* in wisdom—would frame Proverbs, a book on the *acquisition* of wisdom, as wisdom's literary patron.

[55] In her socioeconomic analysis, Yoder evaluates Woman Wisdom as an expression of the Capable Woman, who is a composite of virtuous qualities in the Persian-period socioeconomic context (see *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 93–110).