



Wisdom Literature

Wisdom and Women

It has been said that much of Proverbs, especially chapters 1-9, consists of men talking to men about women. Much of that talk takes the form of warnings: "My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, 'Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us wantonly ambush the innocent . . . throw in your lot with us, we will all have one purse,' my son, do not walk in their ways" (1:10-19).

Very often, the temptations are presented by women. "The lips of a loose [literally 'strange'] woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as wormwood" (5:3-4). Wisdom especially recommends fidelity in marriage:

Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well,

Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets?

Let them be for yourself alone, and not for sharing with strangers.

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth,

A lovely deer, a graceful doe,

May her breasts satisfy you at all times, may you always be intoxicated by her love. (5:15-19)

It is clear from this that the sages who wrote Proverbs were not thoroughly misogynistic, and did not lack appreciation for women. They are beset, however, by anxiety about the threat posed to the stability of society by sexual attraction. The warnings are not against sexual liaisons in general, but specifically against adultery, that is, against relations with the wife of another man:

To preserve you from the wife of another,

From the smooth tongue of the adulteress

Do not desire her beauty in your heart,

And do not let her capture you with her eyelashes,

For a prostitute's fee is only a loaf of bread,

But the wife of another stalks a man's very life. (6:24-26)

Surprisingly, the sage is not especially concerned with prostitutes, who are deemed harmless. A person who dallies with the wife of another risks the aggrieved husband's revenge:

He will get wounds and dishonor, and his disgrace will not be wiped out,

For jealousy arouses a husband's fury,

And he shows no restraint when he takes revenge,

He will accept no compensation, and refuses a bribe no matter how great (6:33-35)

Deuteronomy stipulates that if a man is caught lying with the wife of another, both of them must die. Proverbs assumes that this law is not in force. The aggrieved husband might in principle accept compensation. The *de facto* penalty seems to be "wounds and dishonor."

The Strange Woman

The primary image of temptation is "the strange woman" (*ishah zarah*). This figure is first introduced in 2:16-19, where she is associated with the adulteress (cf. 5:3-4). The most elaborate description is in chapter 7. The author claims to see "a young man without sense" who is accosted by a woman "decked out like a prostitute, wily of heart." She seduces the young man, who goes with her like an ox to the slaughter. The chapter ends on a somber note: "her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death" (7:27). Each of the passages dealing with the strange woman similarly ends with a warning that her ways lead to death (cf. 2:18-19; 5:5).

The "strange woman" of Proverbs has given rise to a multitude of interpretations. The claim that her ways lead down to Sheol leads some commentators to conclude that she is a mythological figure, but it is clear that she is a human figure, not a goddess. She is "decked out like a prostitute," but is not actually one. Many scholars have supposed that the adjective "strange" here refers to foreign women. The warnings against the strange woman might then be related to the crisis over intermarriage in the time of Ezra, when Ezra allegedly forced the men of Jerusalem to divorce their foreign wives and send them away, with their children (Ezra 9-10). Yet Proverbs never indicates that she belongs to a different people. In contrast, a passage from the Egyptian Instruction of Ani warns of "a woman from abroad, who is not known in her (own) town" (Ani iii [13], *ANET*, 420). The woman in Proverbs 7, however, is at home. It is her husband who is out of town.

The most satisfactory explanation of the strange woman is simply that she is the wife of another. This is explicitly the case in chapter 7, which says that her husband has gone on a journey. She is first of all the adulteress. But more broadly, she is a transgressive figure, a woman who does not adhere to conventional social norms. In Proverbs this figure takes on

symbolic significance, so that she represents the opposite of wisdom. Wisdom leads to life; the strange woman leads to death. Wisdom is the attitude that defers to the teaching of parents and elders; the strange woman represents transgression, straying from the approved path.

The discourses of Proverbs 1-9 conclude with a contrast between the figure of Wisdom, who is also female, and “the foolish woman.” Wisdom builds her house and provides her guests with bread and wine. The foolish woman, in contrast, is ignorant and knows nothing, and her ways lead to death. The fact that Wisdom is a female figure is probably an accident of Hebrew grammar, but it is nonetheless significant. Female figures are not inherently negative. They can represent Wisdom as well as the “strange woman.” This accords with the scattered observations about women that we find in the body of Proverbs. On the one hand, “he who finds a wife finds a good thing

, and obtains favor from the Lord” (18:22), and “a prudent wife is from the Lord” (19:14). On the other hand, “a wife’s quarreling is a continual dripping of rain,” (19:13) and “it is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious wife” (25:24).

The Capable Wife

Proverbs ends with a remarkable poem on “the capable wife.” This poem is a valuable counterbalance to the picture of the “strange woman” in Proverbs 1–9 and is probably placed at the end of the book for this reason. It shows that the sages were not misogynistic; they were critical of some female behavior, not of women as such. But for all its professed praise of women, 31:10-31 is unabashedly patriarchal in its perspective. It reflects the crucial contributions of women to agricultural society in antiquity. The capable wife rises while it is still night and provides food for her household. She buys and sells and operates the distaff and the spindle. Proverbs 31 shows high respect for her competence. In the end, however, much of the glory redounds to the husband, who is a gentleman of leisure because of her labors and can take his place among the elders of the city gates.

In all of this, Proverbs shares the typical attitudes towards women in traditional societies, both ancient and modern. The perspective is relentlessly male. Women are valued, or not, for the effect they have on men. A woman who fears the Lord and defers to her husband is to be praised. Independence is not virtue for women. This attitude is light years away from modern feminism, but it is not entirely negative either. The husband in Proverbs 31 may not rise early to help his wife, but at least he joins in the praise of his wife and appreciates what an asset she is.

If some of the sayings about contentious wives seem even mildly misogynistic, it should be noted that Proverbs is less open to criticism on that count than the later wisdom books. Ecclesiastes does not say much about women, but what he does is typically acerbic: “One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found” (Qoh 7:28). Ben Sira says much more, and his comments reveal much about attitudes to women in traditional societies, including that of ancient Judaism. His comments on daughters are especially revealing:

*A daughter is a secret anxiety to her father
And worry over her robs him of sleep;
When she is young, for fear she may not marry,
Or if married, for fear she may be disliked.
While a virgin, for fear she may be seduced
And become pregnant in her father's house,
Or having a husband, for fear she may go astray,
Or though married, for fear she may be barren.
Keep strict watch over a headstrong daughter,*

Or she may make you a laughing-stock to your enemies (Sir 42:9-11).

Thus far, we can appreciate the social realities that fed Ben Sira's anxieties. Divorce in ancient Judaism was at the discretion of the man, and pre-marital pregnancy carried an extreme stigma. More difficult to excuse is Ben Sira's conclusion:

Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good;
It is a woman who brings shame and disgrace.

This outburst is exceptional in the wisdom literature, and indeed in the biblical tradition as a whole. Ben Sira seems to have been worried about honor and shame to an exceptional degree.

Even Ben Sira, however, can also wax lyrical about the happiness of the husband of a good wife and the joy that she brings to her husband (Sir chapter 26), even if the praise is coupled with warnings against the headstrong daughter. But as in Proverbs 31, the praise is strictly from the male perspective. Not only does a modest wife add charms to charm, but "a silent wife is a gift from the Lord" (Sir 26:14).

Proverbs is considerably more appreciative of women than Ben Sira. It is possible that the difference has something to do with the respective social settings of the authors. Proverbs 31 clearly presupposes an agricultural society, where the labor of the wife is essential to the well-being of the household. Ben Sira, in contrast, is an urban dweller. He appreciates a well-ordered home, but he lives in a world that had less room for female agency than the traditional world of Proverbs.

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