The Proverbs 31 “Woman of Strength”:
An Argument for a Primary-Sense Translation

Megan K. DeFranza

Proverbs 31:10–31 is one of the better-known passages of the Old Testament. Many of us hear sermons preached from this text every Mother’s Day, yet these sermons often miss the meaning of this passage. Many pastors hold up the Proverbs 31 woman as the model for all women, yet they present a distorted and limited view of women, hindered as they are by imprecise English translations. Given the weight placed upon the Proverbs 31 woman as an example of “biblical womanhood,” it is essential that we correct our reading of the text. One of the best ways we can do this is by returning to a more literal or primary-sense translation.

For a word attested more than 240 times in the Old Testament, some may find it surprising that scholars cannot agree on a standard translation for khayil in the context of Proverbs 31:10–31. The range of translations for ‘esheth-khayil includes “wife of noble character” (NIV), “virtuous woman” (KJV), “excellent wife” (NAS), “capable wife” (NRS, JPS), “truly capable woman” (NJB), “worthy wife” (NAB), “woman of worth” (DB), “valiant woman” (DRA), and “virtuous and capable wife” (NLT). What may be even more surprising is how far these translations diverge from the primary sense of khayil. In his entry in the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Hermann Eisinger explains, “Despite the frequent occurrence of khayil in the sense of ‘army’, its basic meaning must be given as ‘strength, power’.” Yet, all good translators know that, when it comes to identifying the meanings of words, context is key. The semantic range of any word is determined by its use in various settings. Thus the range of khayil is broad enough to include, in addition to strength or power, such concepts as efficiency and wealth. It is the context of Proverbs 31 that seems problematic for many translators. How should one render a term normally appearing in a male military context when it shows up in the arena of female domestic life? This context alone has been perceived by many as providing sufficient grounds for translators to move away from the notion of strength or power toward English substitutes that do not maintain the idea of strength as part of their semantic range.

In this article, I will argue that translators of Proverbs 31 should retain the primary sense of khayil as “strength” for several reasons: first, to convey the primary meaning of the Hebrew text; second, to render more carefully the meaning of khayil in the context of Proverbs 31; and, last, to overcome the disparate portraits of men and women in the Hebrew Bible. Allow me to unpack this last point.

Many (modern, Western) women feel isolated from the biblical text, especially the text of the Old Testament. Most of the heroes recounted within the world of ancient Israel were men, and military men at that. These are the facts. Still, the negative impact of this reality can be mitigated. While female heroes of the Scriptures will always be outnumbered by males, it is important to show the qualitative similarity between them even while the quantitative disparity remains. The poem found in Proverbs 31 can serve to do just that, but will fail to do so if standard translations are maintained. That Hebrew authors who are often accused of misogynist bias did not flinch from ascribing to a woman the same title given to military heroes throughout the Old Testament should cause students of this text to pause and consider the significance of such an ascription.

In order to argue my case, I will look briefly into the historical and literary contexts of the Proverbs 31 woman, walk carefully but quickly through an examination of the poem itself, and show the superiority of a primary-sense translation of ‘esheth-khayil as the “woman of strength.”

Historical and literary context

Two sections of Proverbs 31 bear affinity for one another: “The sayings of King Lemuel—an oracle his mother taught him” and the woman of strength. Both hold up women as purveyors of wisdom who reinforce and illustrate the teaching given throughout the entire book of Proverbs. The instructions to the crown prince (vv. 3–9) illustrate concern for sexual morality, temperance, and justice for the poor, while the portrait of the woman (vv. 10–31) shows the rewards given to those who work hard, practice generosity, and fear the Lord. They are models for leaders in the community as well as commoners who provide the “human counterpart to” the personified Woman Wisdom of chapters 1, 8, and 9, providing an elegant inclusio (a theme to mark the beginning and the end) to the book as a whole.

While noting the important similarities between the woman of Proverbs 31 and Woman Wisdom, Bruce Waltke makes a strong case for understanding Proverbs 31 as a real woman. He concludes that she “has been canonized as a role model for all Israel for all time. Wise daughters aspire to be like her, wise men seek to marry her (v. 10), and all wise people aim to incarnate the wisdom she embodies, each in his [or her] own sphere of activity.” It is this interpretation—the Proverbs 31 woman as a human model of personified Wisdom—that will guide the discussion that follows. Proverbs 31:10–31 stands as an alphabetical acrostic poem. Aside from its alphabetical organization, the poem does not appear to lend itself to simple structural analyses. For this reason, I will follow the pattern of many commentators in grouping disparate verses by topic in order to condense my own remarks.

Megan K. DeFranza is a graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and a doctoral candidate at Marquette University writing her dissertation on theological anthropology and intersex. She lives with her husband, Andrew, and daughters, Lórien and Eden, in Beverly, Massachusetts.
Introduction

A woman of khayil who can find? Her worth exceeds precious stones (v. 10).

The poem opens with a question and a declaration that work together to describe the rarity and value of a certain type of woman. While we are working toward the translation of khayil, there are other observations that can be made from this introductory verse. First, the finding of this woman recalls other portions of Proverbs that value finding a woman (i.e. obtaining a wife). Proverbs 18:22 states: “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord” (NRS). But this verse also bears striking resemblance to another in reference to personified Wisdom, Proverbs 8:35: “For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord” (NRS). The difficulty of finding this woman also recalls the difficulty of finding Wisdom, especially as presented by Job 28. Rather, the rarity of this woman—and of Wisdom herself—only serves to indicate the value of the search.

Second, the astute reader will notice the connection between this passage and the advice given to King Lemuel, which also begins with instructions about khayil and women: “Do not give your strength (khayil) to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.” In the context of this oracle, khayil is variously interpreted. It is rendered “strength” by the NIV, TNIV, NAS, and NRS, and “vigor” or “energy” by the NAB and NJB, respectively. The Septuagint translators use plouton (“wealth”). Perdue suggests “moral worth,” though others (Holliday and Eising) have suggested “sexual potency.” Bruce Waltke rightly broadens the reference to “all that contributes to making him a strong king.” The women against whom the king is warned are qualified by the second half of the verse: “those who destroy kings.” Thus, the reference is not to women in general, but to either the “strange woman” decried earlier in the book of Proverbs, to sexual relations outside of marriage, or to a large harem of concubines, addressing the downfalls of David and Solomon, respectively.

By juxtaposing these two passages, Proverbs advises the reader not to spend his khayil on women who will bring him ruin, but to search for a woman who will bring him khayil. The association with precious stones also recalls Woman Wisdom, whose worth is similarly described in Proverbs (3:15, 8:11) and in Job (ch. 28). This worth may also intimate that the author has more than the value of wealth in mind in using khayil. Still, financial gain is a major theme as the following verses indicate.

Her husband trusts her. He does not lack spoil (v. 11). She brings him good, not evil, all the days of her life (v. 12).

The poet’s choice of shalal for “spoil” or “plunder,” rather than riches or gain, calls to mind the most common use of khayil as military might. Just as military heroes, ‘anshey-khayil (“men of might”) or gibborey-khayil (literally “sons of strength,” most often rendered “mighty warriors”), brought the spoils of war home to their families, so this ‘esheth-khayil provides plunder in her own way. This she does not only in times of war, but also “all the days of her life.” She brings plunder and other things that are good, so her husband cannot but place his trust in her. Still, the general terms “good” and “evil” expand the discussion beyond that of wealth so that the greatest number of verses in the poem point to this as a major interest, if not the major interest, of the author.

Her work ethic and business acumen yield financial strength

She selects wool and flax and delights in working with her hands (v. 13). She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle (v. 19). She makes linen and sells it and supplies belts to the merchants. She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar (v. 24). She rises while it is still dark and gives food to her household and instructions to her female servants (v. 15). She considers a field and buys it. From the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard (v. 16). She watches over what goes on in her household and does not eat the bread of idleness (v. 27).

These verses enumerate the types of tasks the senior female in a household would engage in: trading for wool and flax or processing these raw materials from the household supply (vv. 13, 19) and selling the excess once her household is provided for (v. 24), food provision for those in the household (vv. 14–15), oversight of female servants (v. 15), purchasing property with monies from her own income and overseeing its use to increase the financial production of the household (v. 16), and general supervision of household affairs. This woman is praised not only for her work, but also for her attitude (her hands work “with delight” or “willingly,” v. 13), the quality of her food ( likened to, or actually, foreign delicacies, v. 14), her diligence (rising before dawn, v. 15), and the wise oversight of her household (v. 27).

While these activities may appear mundane on the surface, several poetic allusions suggest multiple layers of meaning that lend support to an understanding of khayil as more than financial strength. First, Al Wolters (following the work of Paul Humbert) points out that the “apparently innocent” phrase “stretch out the hand” (v. 19) is closely related to an “aggressive” idiom found also in the Song of Deborah in reference to the heroic action of Jael. Second, Waltke notes that the word rendered “food” in verse 15 is literally “prey” from a verbal root meaning “tear to pieces.” He suggests that “the poet is using an incomplete metaphor for a lioness, which hunts its prey at night.” These unusual terms evoke images of physical strength adding to the surface message of financial strength. The next set of verses illustrates the results of such hard work.

Financial and emotional security provided by the woman of strength

She girds her loins with strength and strengthens her arms (v. 17). She senses that her trading is profitable. Her lamp will not be quenched at night (v. 18). She does not fear for her household when it snows for all of her household are clothed in scarlet
Images of clothing (girding) illustrate the strength (‘oz) this woman employs for the service of others (v. 17). Rather than suggesting that she rises before dawn (v. 15) and toils late into the night (v. 18), so that she is never seen to rest, the reference to her lamp (v. 18) is a symbol of her “enduring prosperity.” This prosperity is further illustrated by references to scarlet and purple—dyes that required extensive trade and whose rarity led to their association with the wealthy and the royal. The Vulgate reading of scarlet as “double garments” seems to fit the context of cold weather better than scarlet. Murphy suggests an emendation substituting senayim (double) for sanim (scarlet). Both are images of security—physical or financial—and both are supported by the references to power and glory (v. 25)—two terms that also connote royalty, divinity, and possibly piety.

The language of “girding the loins” (v. 17) provides justification for relating these images of prosperity to the broader idea of strength. Waltke explains that this expression is an idiomatic indicating preparation, usually for “heroic or difficult action.” While he emphasizes the metaphorical nature of the phrase in this passage, he does admit that it invokes a “masculine and heroic image.” I find it significant that this is the only time in the Hebrew Bible that the expression is used of a woman. In this context, I would argue that one could reasonably draw a connection between the physical security provided by military heroes—the “men of might” (anshey-khayil) or “sons of strength”/“mighty warriors” (gibborey-khayil)—for those under their protection, and that which our heroine (‘esheth-khayil) provides in these poetic lines: namely, protection from the elements as well as emotional and financial security regarding the future.

Strength of character/strong of mind

She opens her hands to the poor and extends her hands to the needy (v. 20). She opens her mouth with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue (v. 26).

These verses support a reading of the Proverbs 31 woman as an incarnation of Wisdom, summing up the instruction in the book of Proverbs that shows the wise as generous and the foolish as stingy. The phrase torah-khesed (faithful instruction) is unique and could refer to her mode of teaching (with the kindness of a mother rather than harshness of a father), teaching modeled on her generosity, or a particular body of instruction, such as the content of Proverbs.

Conclusion: the reward of praise

Her husband is known at the city gates, where he sits among the elders of the land (v. 23). Her children rise up and bless her.

Her husband praises her (v. 28). Many daughters render khayil, but you surpass them all (v. 29). Charm is false, and beauty is meaningless; [but] a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised (v. 30). Give her the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her at the city gate (v. 31).

Our poem concludes with descriptions of, and injunctions to, praise. These are justified by a summary of her work (v. 29) and the support of a proverb (v. 30). The reintroduction of khayil (v. 29) beautifully ties the end of the poem with its opening title. In this verse, it is connected to the woman’s action, rather than her person, and renews the connection with the heroic deeds accomplished in military contexts. Al Wolters translates ‘asu khayil as “to do valiantly” in a military context, though he admits as well “[t]he idiom can also mean ‘gain riches’, and the poet is probably exploiting this ambiguity in Prov. 31:29.” Wolters argues that the second half of this verse also points back to the military context. He insists that the phrase given here as “surpass” (literally to “go up over/against”) is another military phrase meaning “going out to do battle against an enemy.” He adds, “In fact the meaning ‘surpass’ is assigned to it only here.” Thus, the ‘esheth-khayil renders khayil and is therefore praised in this poem which calls the reader to join in her continued praise.

The strength of “strength”

More than any other commentator, Al Wolters has emphasized the necessary connection between khayil as it is used in Proverbs 31 and its military contexts throughout the remainder of the Old Testament. He has made a strong case for understanding this text as a heroic hymn—a form he believes “may underlie the hymns of the Psalter.” He insists that ‘esheth-khayil is “the female counterpart of the gibborey-khayil, the title given to the ‘mighty men of valour’ which are often named in David’s age.” Thus, he translates ‘esheth-khayil as Valiant Woman.” Ellen Davis agrees with his translation because it “better captures the tone of the extravagant poem of praise that follows.” While I agree with their exegesis, I do not believe that “Valiant Woman” is the best translation possible. My main objection is that the primary sense of valiant is that of bravery or courage. Though this idea does occur in our text (vv. 21 and 25), our examination of the passage indicates that it is not the primary emphasis of the poet.

Though Perdue and Davis argue that khayil carries the meaning of moral character, an idea supported by the NIV (“woman of noble character”) and KJV (“virtuous woman”), this association is dubious. The contexts that Davis cites in support of this thesis are Exodus 18:21 and Ruth 3:11, where the idea of moral worth may be added to an indication of strength or capacity, but is not required. The association of khayil with morality is not supported by Hebrew lexicons, nor does it arise from the Septuagint rendering of the Hebrew with andreian (manly, brave) or dunamis (“power, might, strength, force, capability,
resource." The connection between khayil and morality may have arisen on the basis of the Vulgate, *virtutis* (from *virtus*), but, even here, it is more a matter of semantic slippage from Latin to English by those who have forgotten that *virtus* arises from *vir* and is defined first as "the qualities typical of a true man, manly spirit, resolution, valour, steadfastness" and only second as "excellence of character or mind, worth, merit, ability." Davis has argued more persuasively against the NRS, NJB, and JPS translations of *khayil* by stating simply that "capable is a colorless translation for the Hebrew word."

In place of all these, I have suggested the primary-sense translation "strength." Although I know there is not a complete overlap in the semantic ranges of *khayil* and "strength," I believe this word incorporates more of the sense of the Hebrew than other English alternatives and also fits its use in the context of Proverbs 31. According to *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, "strength" includes the following (all of which apply to the poem of the *‘esheth-khayil*: Bodily or muscular power (vv. 17, 25); mental power (vv. 13, 16, 26); moral power, firmness, or courage (vv. 20, 21, 25); power by reason of influence, authority, resources, number; effective force, potency, or cogency, as of inducements or arguments (v. 26); and something or someone that gives one strength or is a source of power or encouragement; sustenance (vv. 10–12, 23).

I believe that "woman of strength" is a better translation than "strong woman" on account of the fact that it is used more seldom in English. The unfamiliarity of the English phrase can function to pique readers' attention and cause them to ask, "What does this mean?" so reading the passage for an explanation to their question. At the same time, I have chosen to retain the generic "woman," even though the context of the poem clearly indicates that the woman here is a wife, mother, and manager of her household. In this case, I believe the more generic term may broaden the receptivity or application of the example of this woman to more than "wives"—a distinction necessitated by our culture, not that of ancient Israel.

My translation, "woman of strength," is not novel. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* suggests "woman of might" and "doughty woman" for the phrase, and other scholars have requested *khayil* not be "diluted" by the loss of the idea of "strength" simply due to its association with a woman. Still, I believe it is needed.

Current translations have lost the concept of strength as associated with the woman of Proverbs 31. In doing so, they dilute or distort the message of the poem. In addition, this imprecision makes it almost impossible to note the connection between the heroine of the poem and the heroes of ancient Israel whose praise is recounted over and over in the historical books. Such corrective translation is needed in our day to disabuse many modern women (and men) of the notion that the Hebrew Scriptures do not present women as models of strength who are just as worthy to be emulated as the mighty men of old.

**Why a better translation matters to women and men**

When I shared the basic thesis of this paper with a woman from my church, she reacted by saying, "So I don't need to be embarrassed by the fact that I can pick up a canoe and carry it down to the water?" I know many women who wrestle with the fact that they are strong (physically, mentally, or having a "strong personality") because they know that these character traits are not always valued in women, especially in Christian women. Many women feel as if they need to hide their strengths if they are going to find a husband. They fear that financial success from their careers and their other strengths will be viewed as threats rather than as assets to bring into marriage or into the church. But a careful reading of Proverbs 31 gives us the example of a husband who values his wife for her financial, physical, moral, and mental strength.

Leonard Sax, in his book *Why Gender Matters*, takes hundreds of pages to argue for differences between men and women, boys and girls, in order to encourage single-sex education in public schools and different teaching and parenting styles for the sexes. Many people have found his work helpful in providing alternative approaches to teaching and disciplining boys and girls. But when Sax comes to giving his definitions of manhood and womanhood, he does not make any arguments. He simply draws upon what he believes to be common knowledge. He writes: "You and I know that real manhood has nothing to do with playing video games. You and I know that being a man means using your strength in the service of others." When it comes to defining womanhood, he is less direct and says, "becoming a real woman is not about how you look on the outside, but about who you are inside." According to Sax, womanhood has to do with character.

While he does not cite our passage, Sax's definition of "true womanhood" comes right out of the NIV translation of Proverbs 31, the "woman of noble character." But, according to Sax, manhood and womanhood are infinitely different from one another. We must raise boys to be men, not women, and girls to be women, not men.

The problem with Sax's definitions of true manhood and true womanhood is that they do not match the picture we find in the Bible. In Proverbs 31:10–31, we find a woman described with masculine metaphors of strength as the embodiment of the wisdom laid out in the book of Proverbs.

Women and men in our churches today need to know that not only men have strength. Women also have strengths: physical, mental, moral, and financial strength. Christian women and men need to know that all followers of Jesus Christ are called to use their strengths in the service of others, whether physical, financial, moral, mental, or spiritual. If the ancient Hebrews were not afraid to praise a woman for physical, financial, moral, and mental strength, we should not hesitate to do the same.

**Notes**

1. Darby Bible.
2. Douay-Rheims American Version.
Francis Waltke, Walter also Purdue, definitions word Waltke, filter courage; Proverbs, of Davi James Davi, the Wife Wolters, David Leo courageous; Leonard Ellen Murphy, Waltke, Wolters, Sub Purdue, sophia Waltke, Wolters, Wolters, Purdue, Sax, com Waltke, A l Proverbs P. Wolters