THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PROVERBS

Craig S. Keener

Most of us recoil at some Jewish sages' estimation of women, as reported in works such as Sirach (25:19, 24:42:12-14) and perhaps even Ecclesiastes (7:27-28). As the son of Sirach puts it, "Like the moth emerges from clothes, so wickedness emerges from women; a man's evil is better than a woman's goodness..." (Sir. 42:13-14). But does the negative view of women found in later Jewish sages also reflect the perspective on women found in the Book of Proverbs, as some have argued? Does the Jewish and Christian canon actually confer inspired status on chauvinistic claims? While some proverbs might sound like this is the case, an examination of their context among other proverbs indicates that the statements are not against women in general.

A WOMAN AS A SEXUAL THREAT

Many proverbs are warnings against the seductive adulteresses (5:20; 6:24-35; chap. 7; 20:16; 22:14; 27:13; 30:20; cf. 23:27), yet no proverbs warn a young woman to beware of a promiscuous man. This apparent double standard sounds quite different from the double standard by which some modern parents impose strict rules on their daughters while reasoning that "boys will be boys"—but it can be interpreted as no less chauvinistic. Does the writer of Proverbs regard women as more naturally promiscuous and threatening to the opposite gender than men are?

An examination of Proverbs, however, reveals that this is not at all the case. The framework of the introductory section of the book indicates that it is wisdom addressed by the king to his son (1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 22:4:1, 10; 5:1, 7; 6:1, 20; 7:1, 24; cf. 8:32 [Wisdom speaking]). Ancient Near Eastern writers used a father's impartation of wisdom to a son as a literary device to propagate their wisdom. The literary device required that the maxims directly address men. Of what kind of sexual dangers would the author need to warn men? In contrast to some ancient societies (e.g., classical Greece), Israel's records are virtually devoid of accounts of homosexual interest (except Judg. 19:22); the moral danger posed by other men's wives was far more serious. Had ancient wisdom texts publicly addressed women as well as men, we may guess that such texts would have warned women against seductive men; that Proverbs does not do so reflects not its own chauvinism but the use of an ancient Near Eastern genre which in turn reflects the chauvinism of ancient Near Eastern society.

That Proverbs often reflects and comments on social realities without always prescribing them as universal ideals may be demonstrated easily enough by its common references to foolish and sinful behavior. Social differences clearly existed between women and men (e.g., 11:16), and whatever these differences tell us about ancient society, they do not make the author who reports them chauvinistic. Yet Solomon and the other inspired Israelite sages never implied that society's flaws indicated God's perspective. A "manless" woman was humanly defenseless in that society, but God would defend her (15:25, in contrast to the proud man). Further, warnings against adultery not only respected another man's marriage (5:20; 6:29) but faithfulness to one's wife (5:18-19; cf. 31:3). Finally, while ancient male society made women's "beauty" an issue, Proverbs regards her wisdom and fear of God — her intellectual and spiritual prowess — as more important (11:22; 31:30).

WARNINGS ABOUT "BAD" WIVES

Proverbs is replete with warnings about a quarrelsome wife (19:13; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15-16). Again, however, we must point out that the wisdom genre characteristically addressed men (sometimes particularly through the device of a royal son); this does not preclude women from applying the principles to their spouses as well (cf. 26:21). If we replace "wife" with "spouse," most of us can grant a
hearty "Amen" to the principle: It is easier to be alone somewhere than in the presence of a spouse who just wants to fight! (Of course, the principle is more helpful before one enters an unhealthy marriage; Christians cannot use it as an excuse to divorce — 1 Cor. 7:10-16.) And Proverbs hardly stops with warnings against contentious spouses; the general principle is that finding a spouse is finding something good (18:22).

In that society even more than today, the wife's behavior reflected on her husband, providing either fodder for gossip or grounds for praise (12:4; 31:12, 23; and on the whole household, 14:1). But this hardly implies that the author assumed that wives existed only for their husbands' reputation; any member of the family could honor or disgrace the entire household, although the writer (again following cultural conventions) addresses especially men.

Significantly, children's behavior reflected on both parents (10:1 and passim); one's behavior could honor or dishonor not only one's father (e.g., 19:13; 23:24; 29:3, 17), but one's mother (15:20; 17:25; 19:26; 20:20; 28:24; 30:11, 17; the mother appears alone in 29:15). Even when the father is mentioned (e.g., 23:24), the mother is in view (see 23:25). Honoring father and mother especially meant abiding by their sound moral teachings (6:20-23; 10:1; 23:22; the mother appears alone in 31:1). Parents and children both affected each other's reputation in a society very conscious of both honor and shame (17:6).

The principle is not limited to wives, but is a general one: one must honor one's family by right behavior (11:29).

**IN PRAISE OF VIRTUOUS WOMEN**

Although Proverbs directly addresses the male perspective of its primary audience in ancient Israelite society (thus, for example, reflecting women's roles especially in the home and men's especially in the workplace), Proverbs more than balances its warnings against promiscuity with praise of virtue. That the adulteress is female should not cause us to forget that Wisdom is also presented as a woman, sometimes in direct contrast to the adulteress (chap. 9; cf. chap. 8 with chap. 7). The life-giving divine Wisdom Proverbs' readers are exhorted to seek is portrayed as feminine.

When a wife is virtuous, there is heavy stress on praising her (31:28-31). Proverbs praises her for her character (12:4; 31:10), for her wisdom (14:1; 19:14; 31:26; including administrative wisdom, 31:27), for being charitable to the poor (31:20), for her industry (31:11, 15, 17, 25, 27; including in textiles—31:13, 19, 21-22, 24; in handling money—31:14; in real estate—31:16; and as a salesperson—31:18, 24). But above all else, Proverbs praises the woman of God for her walk with God (31:30).

It is very easy for modern readers to be so put off by ancient culture that we miss the message of the text itself. Proverbs was not prescribing ancient Israelite culture's gender roles as normative for all cultures, but did comment significantly on the function of those roles within the culture. Proverbs does not emphasize as a model the docile, submissive wife, but portrays the virtuous woman as one who was industrious, wise, and above all else, godly. This is the same picture the rest of the book provides us for the virtuous man.

**A TEST CASE**

Proverbs reflects contemporary social realities not only in terms of gender but also of class (e.g., 10:15; 13:8; 14:20; 18:23; 22:7; though cf. 18:10-12; 22:2). Folly or laziness could impoverish a person and so reduce that person to debt slavery (11:29; 12:4). A servant becoming a king or a servant supplanting her mistress are unusual but not impossible circumstances (30:22-23). In ancient Israelite society, household servants apparently were virtually part of the household (31:15), but the same text also indicates another feature of Israelite society: addressing the most literate class who would make primary use of the proverbs, the ideal matron in this passage is part of a household that owns servants (31:15).

In the society in which Proverbs was written, having a servant sometimes depicts having sufficient provision; thus it is better to be unknown with a servant than to lack food while pretending to be known (12:9). At times servants are portrayed almost as children: like children, servants could choose to ignore words not backed up with discipline (29:19), and pampering a servant would lead to trouble (29:21).

Yet Proverbs not only depicts social reality; it also advises its wise hearers how to live in that real society. Although by nature succinct, these pithy proverbs do not suggest revolutionary alternatives to reigning customs; rather, they provide insights into how to function in an imperfect social order and also supply insights into God's moral ideals. Wisdom is more important than status in the end; a wise servant would supplant a disgraceful son, by being adopted into the household and the inheritance (17:2). Similarly, if one slanders a slave to the slave's master, presumably leading to the slave's punishment, the slave may curse the slanderer, bringing trouble on the latter (30:10). Since an undeserved curse would not take effect (26:2), and since the law already declared that God would avenge the poor when they cried out to Him (Exod. 22:22-23; Deut. 15:9; 24:14-15), this passage clearly indicates God's concern for justice for the slave (cf. Prov. 22:22-23).

Proverbs' primary concern is moral instruction within the framework of society as it exists, and the collection
thus shows that personal integrity matters more than status: a lowly person is a better person than the one who is rich and proud (cf. 16:8, 19) and better off than an unhappy but wealthy person (15:16).

CONCLUSION

Proverbs depicts the reality of its day, but provides moral principles in the context of that reality that actually challenge many of its society’s ideals. Yet both the society and moral principles depicted in Proverbs provide an interesting contrast to many cultures before and after them. Although ungodly women appear as a threat to men’s sexual virtue, the emphasis on male virtue challenges any cultural double standard, and virtuous women are praised. Both the genre and internal clues in the text indicate that the principle could be reversed to apply to either ungodly or virtuous men as well.

Although the writer regards a wife’s (spouse’s) contention as difficult, Proverbs nowhere emphasizes a wife’s submission or subordination. A virtuous wife brings honor on her household by her industry, wisdom, and relationship with God. Our culture is very different from that of Solomon, Agur, and the other composers of Israelite proverbs, but the moral principles Proverbs articulates remain helpful today.

1 The complaint that one is unlikely to find any righteous women should, however, be taken as hyperbole meant to underline the warning against adulteresses in Ecl. 7:26.

2 E.g., Leonard Swidler, Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1976), pp. 32-36. This essay is not a direct response to Swidler’s case, which employs some critical methodology that would be foreign to many of this article’s readers.

3 Note, however, that the mother as well as the father warns against the adulteress (6:20).

4 This is characteristic of Egyptian wisdom literature (which offers the closest parallels to Israel’s proverbs), e.g., "The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-hotep" (Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, 2d ed., ed. James B. Pritchard [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955; hereafter abbreviated as ANET, pp. 412-14); "The Instruction for King Meri-Ka-Re" (ANET, pp. 414-18); a king addresses his son and successor; "The Instruction of King Amen-em-het" (ANET, pp. 418-19, purportedly Amen-em-het I to his son and successor); "The Instruction of Prince Hor-Dedef" (ANET, p. 419); "The Instruction of Ani" (ANET, pp. 420-21); "The Instruction of Amen-em-opet" (ANET, pp. 421-24).

5 The sixteenth century BCE Egyptian "Protestation of Guiltlessness" from the mortuary texts may indicate that Egyptians also regarded homosexual relations as morally wrong (ANET, p. 34, line A20); cf. also Assyrian laws dating to as early as the fifteenth century (ANET, p. 181, Tablet A 20).

1 TIMOTHY 2:9-10 REVISITED

Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger

"All Scripture is by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). Let us therefore seek the positive message in 1 Timothy 2:9-10 which God has for the believer — a message which both traditionalists and egalitarians have too long ignored.

The world is still trying to pour us into its mold (Rom 12:1-2), a mold fashioned on Madison Avenue rather than in the Scriptures. Distressingly enough, many conservative and evangelical groups buy into a rationale for female behavior that stresses concepts totally at variance with those expressed by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:9-10, where he writes: "the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God."

Even in Christian circles there is often an inordinate emphasis on women’s clothing, accessories, jewelry, hairstyle, and so forth. Along with devotional material, Christian women are instructed in fashion, make-up, diet, exercise, and home decorating until many become preoccupied with external appearance — to the detriment of their spiritual lives and ministries. One male leader suggests that talented Christian women with time on their hands should direct their energies to new ways of concocting turtle soup! A serious profession of godliness has its risks for women in today’s Christian world.

PRAYER

The first command of this passage is that women should pray, and many of us have learned from Evelyn Christiansen’s book, What Happens When Women Pray, what can happen when women band together in earnest and powerful prayer.

There is power in prayer, whether it is used individually or in concert with others. Jesus promised that where two or three were gathered together in His name, that He would be there; and that if any two agreed touching anything on earth, it should be done. James tells us that prayer is a mighty weapon to the pulling down of strongholds. Prayer has proved a most effective instrument in the hands of women who seek to achieve the purposes of God.

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The chapter itself begins with a strong exhortation to pray (1 Tim 2:1,2) and then proceeds to individual direction for both men and women (vs. 8 and 9). How easy it is to read this chapter in search of other material, and to forget that the primary call is to prayer!

IDENTITY

Women often see themselves only in relationship to a man, and identify themselves in terms of these relationships. "I am so-and-so's wife" or "so-and-so's daughter" — or mother, aunt, or grandmother. But women cannot be primarily identified by marital status (unmarried, married, divorced, widowed) any more than men can. Nor can women be simply categorized by function: housewife, babysitter, librarian, nurse, teacher, airplane pilot, medical doctor, factory worker, entertainer, engineer, or even "social butterfly."

1 Timothy 2:10 provides women with the true way to define themselves: by a profession of their highest priority, as they find themselves in God and express their identity in terms of commitment to Jesus Christ and reflecting His love to others.

The practical outworking of that love distinguishes the character of Christian women by lives filled with works which redound to God's praise (Matt 5:16). These women profess godliness, and they are adorned with good deeds. They are persons who know the power of prayer and exercise it on behalf of others. Their identity lies in their profession of godliness, rather than in any relationship with the opposite sex.

We have only to look at Mother Teresa to see an embodiment of this principle. The "hidden history" of Christian women is rich with examples, however — like Marcella’s group in ancient Rome who simply exploded into Bible study, prayer, social service, and scholarship. The pagan philosopher Libanius exclaimed: "What women these Christians have!"

APPEARANCE

Paul calls upon women to appear at public prayer dressed in a modest and appropriate manner. Today we usually discuss the need for women to dress discreetly in a professional career situation, yet this passage calls for women always to be clothed in a way consistent with their profession of godliness.

In New Testament times, ostentation in dress was in itself considered a mark of promiscuity. Plutarch wrote that husbands were enraged if their wives dressed in scarlet or orange. In contrast, today's Christian women are often encouraged to dress elaborately, and are rewarded with much applause and admiration. Some groups of Christian women frequently feature style shows at their meetings, vie in outdressing one another, and in between prayers and the reading of Scripture express the highest admiration for the woman who is the most elegantly dressed. In other Christian circles, grooming and exercise programs receive more attention than an exercise in godliness, and despite the fact that Scripture calls for adornment in good deeds.

But while personal appearance is not of prime importance to the Christian, make no mistake: The Christian is called to present Christ winsomely to the society in which she lives; dowdiness or, worse, slovenliness, brings no honor to Christ. A neat, attractive appearance can certainly open doors for witnessing and ministry. Nevertheless, the impression a Christian woman is called to make is one of godliness and good deeds, rather than elaborate dress. Yet some contemporary Christian women feel their self-worth is enhanced if they are given expensive gifts of clothing and jewelry. One Christian author even recommends wives be submissive as a means of getting fur coats and jewelry from their husbands.

Nowadays, of course, we do not consider pearls as particularly ostentations, but in the days of the New Testament they were highly expensive. Pearl-diving was a dangerous activity, and often slaves were compelled into this high-risk venture, one that all too often cost their lives.

Christ speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven as a pearl of great price. He tells of a merchant who sells all that he has to gain one precious pearl, and so Christ calls us to give all that we have for the riches of His Kingdom. Jesus Himself came into the world seeking a beloved bride, the Church, and He gave even His life to purchase our salvation. Our pearl of great price is knowledge of God and of His will, not outer adornment.

HOSPITALITY

The woman who finds her adornment in good deeds must also resist pressure to turn her home into a show place. 1 Timothy 2:9-10 is amplified by another passage in 1 Timothy 5 which further describes the activities of Christian women. Older women qualifying to be enrolled in the official ministry of the church were expected to have raised children, entertained strangers, and to have washed the feet of saints. Scripture speaks abundantly of the imperative of hospitality: receiving into our homes foreigners, the poor, children, the homeless, and the hungry.

As we struggled to raise our five children and numerous foster children, our efforts at interior decorating grew more futile. Cathie especially was in a panic because she had been led to believe that the pastor's home should always look perfect; anything less proved she was a terrible Christian!
Painfully we came to realize that we could not exercise the kind of ministry of hospitality dictated by 1 Timothy and at the same time make our house look like a display in a home decorating magazine. For example, a neighbor’s child who needed love once supplied his own crayon decorations only hours after a painter had finished refurbishing our living room walls! Visitors from other cultures often did not understand how to draw our drapes without breaking the expensive hangers, remember to wipe their feet before trampling on the decorator-colored carpet, or how to use the garbage can rather than depositing fruit peelings in the front yard. So cleanliness and practicality became our new homemaking objectives, because the effort to maintain elegant furniture and decor would preclude opening our door to those most in need of our hospitality, as would an over-emphasis on elaborate preparation of meals.

These goals were reinforced for us shortly after Dick had accepted the pastorate of a country church in rural Minnesota. We had been praying for an opportunity to interact with some of the Native Americans in the area, but they were a proud people and needed time to assess the newcomers in the community.

One day some city friends came to visit, and we spoke of a book about Christian women which was very popular just then. We chucked together over the advice that wives, arrayed in nothing but saran wrap, should greet their husbands at the front door and inveigle them into sexual encounters under the dining room table. Then Dick took our guests out to enjoy the splendors of a Minnesota autumn while Cathie finished baking the bread and home-made beans. Her Greek study materials were spread out on the dining room table, and she worked away at verb forms in between checking on the contents of the oven.

Suddenly the doorbell rang, and she suspected that the others were playing a trick on her. Was she supposed to come to the door in saran wrap? She marched across the living room with bread dough still clinging to her shirt and blue jeans. But there at the door stood two Native Americans with a request for money to buy a meal and gasoline for the trip back to the reservation. We made it a practice never to give money directly, so she invited them and their carload of friends to come in and try the home-made bread and beans.

As she scurried for the kitchen, she thought of the exhortation to receive strangers, for some thereby have entertained angels unaware (Heb 13:2). She wanted these people to understand how very glad she was that they had come to our house, and she planned to fix the table so that they would know that they were honored guests rather than "charity cases."

On the other hand, they were very hungry, and she did not wish to keep them waiting. The faster she moved, the more she fumbled. Her hasty efforts to have the entire meal on the table in five minutes did not at all produce the desired picture. The plastic tablecloth and mismatched plates, the pickles and jellies still in their jars, lettuce cut in large hunks, and the spills over the edge of the bean pot were all a great mortification! Could this be a table fit to entertain angels?

Frustrated and embarrassed, she sat down at the dining room table with her guests and mumbled an apology. Those gracious and kindly people soon put her at ease as they eagerly ate the simple fare, and shortly the atmosphere became that of a party. When Dick and our city friends returned, they found that the dining room table was fully utilized and they would have to wait their turn for Saturday night supper. So they just pulled up more chairs around the edge and joined in the conversation, jokes, and laughter.

The "angels" who visited that day taught us lessons in hospitality that we willingly pass on to any who believe that God can still send such emissaries to our homes. Our unexpected guests taught us that:

1) The primary purpose of a dining room table is to feed those in need of a meal;
2) Jesus said to feed the hungry, but Jesus didn’t say all your dishes have to match;
3) It’s OK to serve slightly underdone beans if people know how glad you are to have them there;
4) Gourmet food isn’t necessary to have a party;
5) Jesus discouraged elaborate food preparation at the expense of more important spiritual values.

(Check the Mary and Martha story in Luke 10.)

PROCLAIMING GODLINESS

Christians are called to pray and to profess godliness and reconciliation in Jesus Christ. We must examine every attitude in terms of our ultimate commitment to discipleship. 1 Timothy 2:9-10 calls for behavior and appearance befitting a woman who proclaims godliness: The word epangelomai (profess) has within it the concepts of proclamation, profession, and expertise. The Word of God here calls upon each one of us to proclaim Christ’s love in both word and deed — whether in church, home, marketplace, or on the street.

We believe that 1 Timothy 2:9-10 is an important discussion of values for the Christian woman, values that are truly liberating to the woman (and man, too) who seeks to do God’s will, no matter what Madison Avenue tells us.