

THE TWO WISE WOMEN OF PROVERBS CHAPTER 31

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The book of Proverbs claims to be the work of Solomon (1:1, 10:1, 25:1), redacted in Hezekiah's time (25:1; cf. *Bava Batra* 15a). The Midrash says Solomon wrote the Song of Songs when he was young, Proverbs as an adult and Ecclesiastes in old age (Cant. R. 1:10), reflecting the tradition that Solomon engaged in wisdom activity (I Kgs. 5). Ascribing these books to the wise king (I Kgs. 3:12) gave them status and credibility.

The last chapter, Proverbs 31, has two sections, perhaps connected. Both describe clever women, but where one woman preaches, the other practises. In the lesser known section, verses 1-9, a king's mother warns her son against inappropriate conduct; in verses 10-31 a "woman of worth" (*eshet hayyil*) is praised for her accomplishments in an alphabetical hymn.

The chapter faces us with many questions. Are the two women separate and distinct? Are they historical or allegorical figures? Is there a connection with the earlier parts of Proverbs?

The first woman is worried about her son the king's behavior, and tells him that kings must have standards and avoid impropriety. Abraham Ibn Ezra believes Proverbs as a whole is about heeding one's parents (1:8, 6:20, etc.): there is the constant address to *beni*, "my son." The early chapters of Proverbs are the lessons of the father, whom Ibn Ezra believes to be David, with the final section the advice of the mother, Batsheva.

Ibn Ezra follows rabbinic tradition in identifying Solomon with King Lemuel, mentioned in the first verse of chapter 31. This seems to be based on the idea that both are described as sometimes acting foolishly. However, if this is so and the mother is Batsheva, it is not at all certain that the queenly advice tallies with what we know about her. We are aware of how she became David's wife but do not have much idea of her thinking. Presumably, any Israelite queen would be aware of the requirements of Deuteronomy 17:14-20; this queen echoes them when she warns the king not to be a sensualist who lives in luxury and neglects his responsibilities. However, though Deuteronomy warns kings against women, there is no mention of wine, which we would have expected in this context. The Torah was certainly con-

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cerned with the effect of wine on the priests (Lev. 10:9). There is evidence of kingly inebriation, and despite the Psalmist's praise of wine (Ps. 104:15; cf. Jud. 9:13, Eccl. 10:19), Proverbs 20 warns that wine does not go with wisdom. Deuteronomy, however, is a general admonition against anything that deflects a king from his responsibilities. Proverbs 16:10-15 has its own summary of the duties of a good ruler. It has no specific warnings, no references to wine, women or other royal temptations, but insists that kings are answerable to God and must be just and dutiful. These ideas, based on common sense, were probably well known and are behind the queen mother's rebuke to her son.

Yet in introducing the rebuke, the heading of Proverbs 31 is not as straightforward as it appears. It indulges in a play on words, indeed three. We deal first with the reference to *immo*, "his mother". Rabbinic exegesis regards "the teaching of your mother" (Prov. 1:8) as national tradition (*Berakhot* 35b). Saadiah Gaon¹ suggests that *immo* in 31:1 may be a hint of *minhag ha-ummah*, "the custom of the nation". The king therefore could be receiving a rebuke from his mother or from the established tradition, perhaps both. A queen mother might well chastise a king, since it was not unusual for a ruler's mother to play an important role in the kingdom, especially when a king had several wives. We know from I Kings 2:19 that Solomon treated his mother with great respect.

In seeking a reason for the trenchant rebuke, Rashi quotes a midrash² that when Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter, he spent so long listening to her music that he slept late and as the Temple keys were under his pillow, the sanctuary ritual was delayed. The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 70b) says that Solomon's mother feared she would be blamed for his misdeeds: Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, "His mother thrust him against a post and said, 'Everyone knows your father was a God-fearing man, and now they will say that you inherit your sinfulness from your mother.' All the women of the household prayed for a son fit for the throne. I prayed for one who would be zealous, full of Torah knowledge and fit for prophecy. What do you have to do with kings who drink wine and say, 'What need have we of God?'" Rabbi Isaac said, "How do we know that Solomon repented and agreed that his mother was right? From the verse, *I was more brutish than a man, and lacked a man's understanding* (30:2)."

The second play on words has to do with the name of the king. Lemuel (or Lemu'el; verses 1 and 4) appears nowhere else in Scripture. It can be a form of *aleph-vav-lamed* or *yod-aleph-lamed*, "to be foolish", hence "a foolish one". If there actually was a king called Lemuel, he was well named since the chapter insists that he is foolish.³ A connection between princes and foolishness is posited in Isaiah 19:13, *The princes of Zoan no'alu, are become fools*.

Lemuel can also be viewed as a theophoric name, ending with *El*, "God", common in the Bible, like Bethuel and others. The first part of the name, *Lemu* – "to him (or them)", perhaps a contraction of *le-mul*, is variously explained:

1. "For God" – cf. Job 40:4, *"I lay my hand lemo-fi, upon my mouth: i.e. I do not contend against God."*⁴
2. "Towards God" – he approached God after sinning against Him.⁵
3. "Facing God" (cf. I Chron. 29:23).⁶
4. "God is for him (or them)": since in his reign the people worshipped God and there was no idolatry.⁷

It is also possible that Lemuel is a generic name for a budding king or administrator, and that "my son" means "my pupil". This would make the Lemuel poem part of a course of training in the Wisdom schools of the time, however, we do not hear of any other Lemuels in the Bible. Nevertheless the Tanakh does record two similar-sounding names. *Yemu'el* [The Day of God] (Gen. 46:10, Ex. 6:15), is the eldest son of Jacob's son Simeon, and *Nemu'el* [Circumcised of (or for) God] (Num. 26:12, I Chron. 4:24), is possibly identical with Yemu'el; he may alternatively be a Reubenite, brother of Korah's henchmen Dathan and Abiram (Num. 26:9). In Jewish tradition, Lemu'el is one of several names borne by Solomon, which include *Yedidiah* [Lover of (or loved by) the Lord] (II Sam. 12:25, II Kgs. 22:1), an abbreviation of *Yedid Ado-nai* (Deut. 33:12), a name for Benjamin.⁸

If the name Lemu'el indeed denotes foolishness, it could certainly point to Solomon, since he too indulged in pleasures and neglected his duties (I Kgs. 11), though wayward conduct was common amongst ancient kings and despots.

The third play on words in Proverbs 31:1 involves the word *massa*, which can mean an oracle or prophetic burden⁹ and is common in that sense (Isa. 13:1, Hab. 1:1, II Kgs. 9:25, etc.). But if we understand Proverbs 31:1 as "his

mother's message (or warning)", what do we make of "*Melekh massa*", which appears to mean "King of Massa"? Massa as a place does appear in Genesis 10:30 and 25:14, and I Chronicles 1:30, as a north Arabian kingdom.

If this is what Proverbs 31 has in mind, then Lemu'el could be its king or chieftain; it could even be that *melekh* means here a man of property and substance, a wealthy baron, as may also be the case in Ecclesiastes 1:1. If, however, Massa is a place, why does Proverbs 30:1 utilise the word in the form *ha-massa*, "*the Massa*"? Why is Proverbs interested in Massa at all when precedents could have been quoted from nearer home? If Lemu'el is Solomon, why call his kingdom Massa when it would make more sense to use the name Israel? Understanding *massa* as "message" works better within the context of Proverbs 30:1. Also unusual is the form used to name the king, "*Lemu'el melekh*" – "Lemu'el king", rather than the standard Hebrew usage of *Ha-melekh Lemu'el* or *Lemu'el ha-melekh*. The solution seems to be to view *massa* as a play on words, as *both* "message" *and* a place name.

Are the two women of Proverbs 31 connected? We could identify the wise woman of 31:1-9 and the woman of worth of 31:10-31 if we could assume that Solomon is Lemu'el, that Lemu'el's mother is Batsheva, and that Solomon/Lemu'el listened to his mother's rebuke and said, "What a clever woman my mother is!" and then lauded her with a hymn. Impressive, but unlikely. The woman of the second passage is not a royal queen. The passage is more likely to be an independent composition, an antithesis to verses 1-9. The *eshet hayyil* described in verses 10-31 is certainly a woman of worth, but her worthiness is business-like, pragmatic and thrifty.

She is immensely capable, and never stops. She handles both a house and a business. Her home has servants and elegance, but it is not a royal palace. It is an upper-class prosperous home where the wife is in charge. She has a husband, who, thanks to her backing, has the leisure to sit at the city gate and discuss civic affairs. She has children, but we are not told anything about them.

There is no indication that her husband is a king, though he is certainly alive: she is not a queen mother whose husband is deceased, nor do any of her children seem to be a king. Where the concern of the first woman is her son, here the priority appears to be her husband's well-being. Though she makes decisions without him, he fully trusts her and is sure that all is in safe

hands. She is sensible, but there is no evidence that she has a sharp tongue. Whoever she is, she appears to be a different woman from the queen mother of verses 1-9. If this second passage really were a tribute to the king's mother, the author would have composed a different poem, using the language of life in a royal palace. The two sections of chapter 31 are clearly different and distinct, despite some similarities in style and vocabulary.

Whether the woman of verses 10-31 has a name depends on whether she is a real person or an allegorical figure. In Jewish sources there are three main views:

1. She is Jewish womanhood as a whole: "a pious woman" (Targum), "eager and upright" (*Metzudat Tziyyon*), "capable of prosperity" (Ibn Ezra), "a reminder of his mother" (*Metzudat David*). The Septuagint sees her as "an intelligent woman" (cf. 19:14, *ishah maskelet*). She is not romantic, sensual, intellectual or even particularly spiritual, despite verse 30 ("a God-fearing woman, she deserves praise"). She exemplifies the Wisdom tradition equating the fear of the Lord with wisdom (Prov. 1:7, 9:10; cf. Ps. 111:10, Job 28:28, Eccl. 1:14) without preaching piety and prayer.

2. She is the paradigm of the wife who is her husband's support and help (Gen. 2:18-25) – a woman in a man's world (verse 11). This echoes 18:22, *Whoever finds a (good) wife finds happiness* (cf. Eccl. 26:1). Because the poem is an alphabetical acrostic, midrashic sources say, "As God gave the Torah to Israel by means of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, so He praises Jewish women by means of the 22 letters" (*Yalkut Mishlei*). Wives of whom rabbinic commentary finds hints in the poem include:

- a. Sarah, who equalled Abraham in charity and kindness.¹⁰
- b. Noah's wife, who helped to save civilisation from the Flood.¹¹
- c. Beruriah, the clever wife of Rabbi Meir.¹²

3. She is a symbol of Wisdom, Torah, the soul, the Sabbath, or God (specifically the Divine Presence). The Hebrew words for all these are feminine, e.g. *Wisdom has built her house: she has set up her seven columns* (Prov. 9:1). Although God is called Israel's husband in Isaiah 54:5, later mystical literature has *eshet hayyil*¹³ as a symbol for the Divine Presence, seen as the feminine side of God.

Like the *hayyah* who is *the living spirit in the wheels* (Ezek. 1:20), each symbol that the *eshet hayyil* may represent is a leading principle in history

and civilization. Traditional Jewish exegesis prefers to see *eshet hayyil* as a symbol of Torah. The Hafetz Hayyim, Israel Meir Kagan, applied verse 23 (the husband sitting at the gates with the elders) to a Torah scholar being greeted in the next world by the sages.

Chapter 31 can also be viewed as an independent appendix to Proverbs, characterised in this way by R. B. Y. Scott:¹⁴

1. 31:1-9: A Queen Mother's Admonition

2. 31:10-31: The Ideal Housewife

Scott's use of the term "housewife" is quite inadequate, since the *eshet hayyil* is no stay-at-home "domestic duties" woman. She deserves a better sobriquet and has acquired it in the high estimation which the passage has developed in Jewish history. It probably provided the precedent for the custom in some places of the husband concentrating on his studies while the wife ran a business.

Eshet Hayyil entered the Sabbath eve home liturgy, where it was popularly understood as a gracious tribute to the Jewish woman. It helped that the poem was an alphabetical acrostic, a remarkable aid to memorising its content, though the Sabbath eve table probably uses it more for song than for substance.

NOTES

1. Cited in *Da'at Mikra: Mishlei* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983), p. 266.

2. Leviticus Rabbah 12:3, Numbers Rabbah 10:8, *Yalkut, Mishlei* 964; cf. S. Buber, introduction to *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, 1868, no. 8, note 4.

3. See I Sam. 25:25, *As his name, so is he*.

4. Rashi, Cant. Rabbah 1:10, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:2.

5. Rashi.

6. Isaiah of Trani, quoted in *Da'at Mikra: Mishlei*, p. 266, rendered the name, "His throne faced God".

7. Attributed to Ibn Ezra.

8. Where did the name Solomon derive? It was Batsheva who named him (II Sam. 12:24). This is the *keri*, followed by the *Peshitta* and *Targum Yonatan*, which say *va-tikra*, "she named him", although the *ketiv* has *va-yikra*, "He (David) named him". The name Solomon (*Shelomo*), connected with *shalom*, "peace", is said to be a prophecy that in his days Israel would have peace (I Chron. 22:9-10), though it may be a generic royal title like Pharaoh and Avimelech.

9. See R. V. on Proverbs 30:1.

10. The poem is said to be Abraham's eulogy for his wife; see Midrash *Tanḥuma* to Genesis 23.

11. Midrash *Mishlei*.

12. Midrash *Mishlei*.

13. Midrash *Mishlei*, Buber edition, p. 47a.

14. *Anchor Yale Bible* edition of Proverbs/Ecclesiastes, 1995.