



## MISHLEI – PROVERBS: WEAVING THE WEB OF WISDOM

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In recent years, it has become almost routine to describe the book of Mishlei as quintessentially patriarchal and anti-women, based firmly on a worldview that can only imagine women in a binary manner either as virtuous wives and mothers or as evil, scheming prostitutes and adulteresses. Biblical scholar Marc Brettler sums up the first section, chapters 1 to 9, with the words: ‘obviously this section is xenophobic and misogynistic’, and Norwegian literary scholar Toril Moi points out that patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position in the symbolic order of things, and thus attributes to them ‘the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God’ (Moi, *Sexual / Textual Politics*, 167)—or in our case, to portray them both as the ‘strange woman’ who seduces young men and leads them down to She’ol, and as ‘Lady Wisdom’, who offers them virtue, wealth, and life.

I would like to challenge this easy labelling of a complex and ancient text, which I think runs the risk of blinding us to the nuances, contradictions, and multiple voices that are woven together into this remarkable anthology of Israelite and international wisdom. Yes, we (probably) all agree that patriarchy is bad and that women and men should be equal, but using our modern values and worldviews to measure and judge a text from a world that is immeasurably different from our own will not reveal what is really going on in the book. Undoubtedly, the society that produced it was patriarchal—but not all varieties of patriarchy are identical, and one thing we do know about them is that the strains, tensions, and injustices that they produce give rise to very varied reactions by the individuals who live within them. Two groups can be discerned: the first fighting against the status quo, such as rebellion, sabotage, subversion, defiance, while the second reinforces it: compliance, exaggeration, deliberate ignoring of contradictions, justification, making exceptions, and submission. Wouldn’t it be more interesting, more rewarding, and ultimately, more significant to us if we tried to uncover and listen to these voices?

As a start to this project, I’d like to compare the beginning and end of the book, to examine the famous ‘Lady Wisdom’ [*chokhmah*] of chapters 1 to 9, to consider male and female fools throughout the book, to investigate the renowned ‘Woman of Valour’ [*eshet chayil*] of the last chapter, and finally to meditate a little on the textile arts so superbly practised by the *eshet chayil* and to use them to think about this text.

The figure of Chokhmah has been loaded with many types of significance by scholars: she has been identified with the Torah by Jews since the rabbinic period; she has been understood as a hypostasis, a personification of God's attribute of wisdom and linked to the figure of Sophia in Gnostic and Christian traditions; and modern academics have variously suggested that she is the survival of a pre-monotheistic Israelite wisdom goddess; the *primaeva* order of the cosmos; or the voice of Creation, among other roles. As we don't have time today to examine all these suggestions in detail I will leave them as possibilities, but, following biblical scholar Michael Fox, will focus on an understanding of Chokhmah as a literary personification situated somewhere between the divine and the human—in Fox's phrase, 'she is at once a child of God and a patron to humans'. She 'plays before God' (8:30-31) at the time of Creation, rather than taking an active part in it, and fulfils her role by her very existence rather than by active interference in human lives. She is available everywhere, ready to welcome all into her hospitable dwelling, present in all human rational activity.

Why is she depicted as female? Obviously the word *chokhmah*, along with many other abstract nouns in Hebrew, is feminine, but this is not a sufficient reason. Modern scholars have pointed to other female wisdom figures in the ancient Near East—the Egyptian goddess Ma'at, for instance, or the Mesopotamian goddesses Nisiba or Ishtar—but perhaps more convincing is the fact that wisdom, particularly embodied and practical wisdom of the sort that is constantly praised in *Mishlei*—was indeed associated with women in the biblical world. Carol Fontaine and others have researched this extensively, investigating both positive and negative roles played by wise women in the Bible and ancient Near Eastern literature: as well as the expected wife / mother versus strange woman / seductress so prominent in patriarchal stereotypes, these roles include teachers, prostitutes, counsellors, authors, servants, queens, slaves (both submissive and uppity), managers, merchants, midwives, craftswomen, mourners, witches, prophetesses, warriors, judges, and negotiators. Even the negative examples employ—or pervert—wisdom to achieve their nefarious goals.

This wisdom of worldly experience, of making and feeding and providing and contriving, is exactly what Chokhmah stands for. As she says in chapter 8 (vv. 12, 15 and 18):

I, Wisdom, dwell in shrewdness [*ormah*], and cunning knowledge [*da'at mezimot*] I find ...  
Through me kings reign, and rulers decree righteous laws ...  
Riches and honour are with me, long-lasting wealth and righteousness.

Though featured particularly prominently in the opening nine chapters, this type of wisdom appears throughout the book, and is by no means restricted to women, though it does seem to be strongly associated with them—perhaps even for the politically incorrect reason that in the patriarchal context, this is the only sort of wisdom deemed accessible to women. Looking beyond the bounds of *Mishlei* for a moment for other examples, we might think of the 'wise women' who appear in the books of Samuel and Kings, skilled in negotiation and the saving of lives; or the women who are described as 'wise of heart' [*chokhmot lev*] in Exodus, who spin goats' hair to make the Tabernacle; or indeed the group of women—midwives, a sister, a mother, and a king's daughter—by whose wise acts Moses is preserved from Pharaoh's murderous intentions. The only alternative depiction of wisdom in the book of *Mishlei* appears in chapter 30, verses 1-9—the section attributed to Agur son of Yaqeh. Here wisdom is totally divine, and indeed inaccessible to humans (vv. 3, 5-6):

I have not learned wisdom, nor the knowledge of the holy ones do I know.  
Every saying of God is pure, He is a shield to all who shelter in Him.  
Add nothing to His words, lest He rebuke you and you be given the lie.

Might this have been regarded as a characteristically male understanding of wisdom? It would be difficult to argue this on the basis of nine verses, so perhaps this is an interpretative step too far. But however we read it, this exceptional passage only underlines the this-worldly, practical nature of wisdom as it is conceived in *Mishlei*—something that guides and shapes practical human actions to promote the flourishing of society, which may be seen at its best in the figure of the Virtuous Woman at the end of the book, as we'll see later.

For a moment, however, let's return to the main section of the book, chapters 10 to 29. Traditionally, the authors of the proverbs that are the main feature of this section have been seen as male: some are named in the text (King Solomon, or Agur son of Yaqeh), while in many cases the fact that a 'son' is often addressed as the recipient of the teachings is assumed to imply that a 'father' must be instructing him. But a closer look might suggest that women need not be excluded from the ranks of those giving instruction in the book, even if they are not explicitly named as authors. The pairing 'father and mother' appears 13 times, as for instance in 1:8:

Hear, my son, your father's reproof, and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

Fathers are mentioned unaccompanied by mothers 5 times; balancing this, it seems significant that chapter 31:1-9 presents 'the words of Lemuel, king of Massa, with which his mother reproofed him'—the words of a queen, mother, and sage delivered to her son. Why should it be assumed that other pieces of advice might not come from the mouths of mothers and other wise women? As Carol Fontaine observes, 'since mothers were teachers to their household, and traditional society relies heavily on proverbs to pass along inherited knowledge, we may certainly assume that women used proverbs, whether they composed them or not' (Fontaine, *Smooth Words*, 57). Since we are still not sure how many of the proverbs of Mishlei are 'folk' forms and how many have been written, edited or reworked by the 'sages' assumed to have composed the book, can we really identify a gendered origin for most of them?

It might be objected that the exalted figure of Lady Wisdom is balanced by the patriarchal negative of Lady Folly, *eshet kesilut* or the 'strange woman' (*ishah zarah*), an adulteress who tempts young men into entering her house and by entrapping them with her seductions, draws them down to death and She'ol. But as several modern scholars have noted, it seems just as likely that mothers as well as fathers, female teachers as well as male, might feel the need to warn young men against such allurements. The feminist biblical scholars Fokkelein Van Dijk-Hemmes and Athaliah Brenner have proposed that the warnings against the strange woman in chapter 7 do come from a female teacher, but regard them as 'the voices of women who have internalized this [andocentric] discourse', playing along with patriarchal concerns to protect paternity and control female sexuality. As Alice Bellis points out, however, it's difficult to see how preaching against 'strange women' would have protected paternity in a society where men had a considerable degree of freedom in pursuing extra-marital liaisons, provided that the woman involved was not married to someone else. Perhaps a female teacher in this type of society who warned young men against such relationships might be regarded as trying to protect other women from the consequences of the double standard of sexual freedom, rather than as propping up internalized androcentric ideas?

In addition, the figure of Lady Folly, or *eshet kesilut*, does not only appear as a foil and antithesis to Lady Wisdom; she also matches the many references to male fools or negative figures—the *kesil*, characterized by Michael Fox as displaying 'smug mental sloth', the morally debased *evil*, and the arrogant and contemptuous *lets*. These and other terms provide the opposites to Chokhmah and characters associated with her, such as the *maskil*, or man of good sense, the *yo'ets*, an adviser or planner, and the *navon*, or wise man. The proverbs of Mishlei constantly pair and contrast these positive and negative figures in the same way as Chokhmah and the *eshet kesilut*:

A wise son gladdens his father, but a foolish son is his mother's sorrow (10:1b)

The plans of the righteous are justice; the designs of the wicked, deceit. (12:5)

Such contrastive sayings are applied to both men and women:

A worthy woman is her husband's crown, but like rot in his bones a shameful wife. (12:4)

Seen from this perspective, it becomes less obvious that the proverbs and teachings of Mishlei are predominantly delivered by fathers and sages, and possibilities open up that enable us to reconsider what such messages might mean in the context of a patriarchal society in which both men and women can transmit this knowledge and these value judgements.

Leaving our equal-opportunity fools and sages, let's take a closer look at the figure who ends the book, the Virtuous Woman, *eshet chayil*, of chapter 31. Once again, she is often dismissed as a patriarchal dream of the ideal wife, busy in the domestic surroundings of the home and heaping up prestige for her husband, but a closer look reveals this is not the whole story. The *eshet chayil* is not a glorified housewife: she directs an extensive household that includes *na'arot*, female servants or slaves; she trades outside the house with other merchants, and is herself compared to a far-travelling merchant's ship (which might imply that she travels on trading missions herself); and she plans the household's economic strategy and invests in land and viticulture. Her children and husband are surprisingly minor characters, mentioned in passing—'Her sons rise and call her happy; her husband, he praises her'—but they are not the sole focus of her life. Rather than emphasizing her roles as mother and wife, this woman is presented as the economic head and manager of the household, the principal economic and social unit of biblical society. Not only is she the source of wealth and prosperity, but she displays wisdom, kindness, strength, and compassion for those who are less fortunate outside her household.

The *eshet chayil* is clearly an embodiment of Lady Wisdom from the opening of the book, as underlined by the many textual links between her description and those celebrating Chokhmah in chapters 1-9:

Ch. 8 verse 11 states: 'For wisdom is better than rubies', while ch. 31 verse 10 opens: 'A worthy woman [*eshet chayil*] who can find? Her price is far beyond rubies', and there are at least another 17 close parallels between Chokhmah and the Eshet Chayil. Thus, for instance, Chokhmah holds length of days in her right hand and wealth and honour in her left, while the Eshet Chayil grasps her distaff and spindle, emblems of her wealth-generating wisdom, in her hands (3:1 and 31:19); Wisdom cries out her sayings at the town gates, which is where the Eshet Chayil is to be praised. Most tellingly of all, while we learn in chapter 9 (v. 10) that 'the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord', the great praise-song to the Eshet Chayil concludes that 'a Lord-fearing woman, it is she who is to be praised' (31:30), rather than one characterized by 'grace' (*chen*) or 'beauty' (*yofi*), those androcentric and superficial markers of a woman's worth.

If we take a step back now and look at the wider picture, we can see that Mishlei is a book that is framed by descriptions and praises of wisdom, *chokhmah*, in both personified and embodied forms. We begin with a unit that glorifies Lady Wisdom, contrasting and comparing her with Lady Folly, and shaping the way in which we read the chronologically earlier main section of the book—an anthology of proverbs exploring the theme of wisdom and folly in myriad incarnations and examples. The end frame juxtaposes the wise words of a queen to her son and the embodiment of Chokhmah, the Eshet Chayil, who provides an ideal example of what Mishlei's conception of wisdom looks like 'in the flesh'.

Finally, I would like to view the book of Mishlei through another frame of practical wisdom by returning to the Eshet Chayil and her expertise in the production and selling of textiles—buying wool and flax and spinning them, clothing her household in the luxury fabrics of linen, purple and scarlet, weaving rugs and belts for trade. In the ancient Near East, textile production was women's work, and was of enormous economic importance. Women were responsible for spinning and weaving the fabrics with which to clothe their families, but in addition, one of the main ways of generating income both at the household level and for institutions such as temples and royal workshops was the production and trade of textiles. Though the actual textiles have not survived (except in Egypt), ancient reliefs and descriptions make it clear that the level of sophistication and skill involved could reach stunning heights: the diaphanous linens of Egypt, the brocaded fabrics shown in Assyrian reliefs, and the purple-dyed cloth worn by Near Eastern royalty—and by the Eshet Chayil's household—give us some idea of the technological levels achieved (and for more

details, see Elizabeth Barber's wonderful book, *Women's Work: The First 6,000 Years*). As a spinner and would-be weaver myself, I am very conscious of the presence and significance of textiles in the biblical worldview—though I doubt I could ever achieve the constant consciousness of and involvement in textile production that must have been shared by most people in the time of the Bible.

A lasting legacy, however, has been the way in which textile manufacture has influenced our patterns of thought and of meaning-making: the semantic link between text, textile, and texture has often been invoked in this context, as well as everyday terms such as 'the fabric of society', or 'weaving a tale'. It even seems that the technology of weaving has shaped the way in which we handle and process information. If we take another look at the book of Mishlei, it might be helpful to see it as a text / textile woven from diverse yarns, integrated into a basic structure (as warp and weft shape the product of a loom), but retaining the varied character and pattern of their diverse social and chronological origins—humble peasant and skilled sage, court and countryside, men and women, pre-exilic and Hellenistic. The fact that Mishlei is an anthology of different collections and mini-collections of individual proverbs and longer sequences lends itself to visualization of the book as a complex, brocaded weaving incorporating many different elements, thus accounting both for the internal contradictions and for its overall and recognizable unity. The beginning and final sections celebrating wisdom in its different guises serve as brocaded borders that reflect motifs that are linked, even if they don't match exactly, framing a simpler middle section of narrow, multi-coloured stripes formed by individual proverbs, reflecting differing and sometimes clashing ideas about men, women, wisdom, and folly. Surely there is room to conclude that women too had a hand in weaving this elaborate web of wisdom?

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