

Article

Overcoming the Violence of “Virtuous” Womanhood: Liberating Women from the Proverbs 31 Paradigm

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Abstract: “Who can find a virtuous woman?” (Prov. 31:10 KJV). My entire life, I have heard and read messages about the “virtuous” woman, as depicted in Proverbs 31:10–31. Though many herald this character as the standard for godly women, I find her portrayal problematic. She is depicted as a one-dimensional worker bee, never engaged in rest, recreation, or relationship building. Further, her spiritual location and formation go unmentioned. How did such a limited illustration become the religious paradigm by which women and girls are measured? At its root is white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalistic misogyny (WSPCM), employed in churches to consign women to “safe”, secondary status while still using them as workhorses and sources of income to keep institutions viable. Once internalized, women and girls bear the crushing weight of an unhealthy, unattainable achievement, struggling to become a fictitious, unrealistic figure. In this article, I refute the WSPCM interpretation of the Proverbs 31 woman as the standard for faithful, Spirit-filled women, offering instead a liberative paradigm grounded in womanist hermeneutics, ethics, and spirituality. This approach provides a critique of and corrective for the oppressive, erroneous, and dangerous interpretations of “virtue” and “womanhood” that do violence to female personhood, especially in the name of religion.

Keywords: womanist theology; ethics; hermeneutics



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1. Introduction

“Be a virtuous woman!” “Become a virtuous woman!” “How to Be/Become a Proverbs 31 Woman!” My entire life, I have heard and seen these messages and titles, first as a member of my childhood church, typically on Women’s Day (the only time a woman was allowed to speak from the pulpit). As a young adult, I heard them at churches in which I served as a musician, and in the last two decades, I have seen them in religious literature or in programmatic themes for Women’s Day services at which I have been asked to preach. Over the years, I have rarely heard sermons that heralded strong, intelligent, decisive women or even sermons that centered on women at all. But when I have heard messages extolling women, they are most often centered on biblical characters depicted as being docile, caring, helpless, outcast, and/or in need of rescue, i.e., Hadassah/Esther, Jephthah’s daughter, Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the woman with the blood hemorrhage, and the woman at the well. Most other sermons I have heard preached about women in the bible focus on those perceived as “bad girls”, including Eve, Jezebel, Rahab, Queen Vashti, Gomer, and the woman caught in adultery. The one woman most often preached, taught, and read about using descriptors such as strong, independent, shrewd, and wealthy not in a pejorative manner, but as hallmarks of worth, is the Proverbs 31 woman. In these sermons, books, and articles, Christian girls and women are strongly encouraged to emulate this character in Proverbs 31:10–31, who is described as industrious, intelligent, business-minded, focused on her work and family, and most importantly, never idle. The call for girls and women to model themselves after this character continues to this day. However, I have often found contemporary interpretations of the Proverbs 31 woman

to be patriarchal and misogynistic in nature, resulting in harmful standards that do violence to girls and women.

As a young woman, I would listen to the overarching narratives about the Proverbs 31 woman, the prescriptions detailing how to imitate her excellent example of virtue, wifely and motherly duty and responsibility, and the admonitions offered to those who might consider rebelling against this paradigm. Something about the entire enterprise never sat right with me. First, the reading of the text itself irritated me. Whereas everyone else appeared to be excited, encouraged, and awed by the woman's seemingly endless energy, I felt exhausted for her. The explicit references to her constant movement, working, and achievements made me tired, especially hearing that her candle never went out—that means she never slept! Then, the fact that she excelled at everything—business, agriculture, real estate, and relationships—as the perfect wife and mother made me feel as though I could never attain this standard. Further, there was no information given about who she was as an individual person.

At the time, I did not have the theological language to express my frustration at how limited, and even marginalized, this character's narrative was. Seminary gave me this language. There, I found the courage and ability to name the patriarchy and heteronormativity that permeated much of the biblical text, including the Proverbs 31 narrative. I committed to using a womanist theological lens in preaching and teaching, determined to dismantle these oppressive structures in favor of a more liberative perspective. Womanist theology, a field pioneered by and through the writings and work of Alice Walker, Katie Geneva Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, and others, is grounded in liberative ethics and hermeneutics that emerge from four foundational principles: (1) radical subjectivity, (2) traditional communalism, (3) redemptive self-love, and (4) critical engagement. Womanism as a conceptual framework is committed to the wholeness and well-being of all people. As an ethic, it advocates the full inclusion of all persons, regardless of gender, sexuality, race, physical or mental abilities, religious beliefs, or creeds. As a hermeneutic, womanism calls for investigative methodologies that “discern hierarchical, mechanistic patterns of exploitation”, as well as the decentering and dismantling of Eurocentric, male-normative ethics (Cannon 2003). Encountering womanism opened my eyes and affirmed my feelings of discomfort with texts that marginalized women and their narratives. Studying and employing womanist principles, ethics, and hermeneutics became my regular approach to preaching and teaching, and I began to call myself “womanist”. I began to question many of the biblical narratives about women, including the Proverbs 31 “virtuous” woman.

What troubled me about this woman and how she was portrayed? As I mentioned previously, the text said nothing about her full personhood. She was depicted as one-dimensional, solely concerned with the well-being of her husband and family. This would be problematic enough if it were just an obscure text in the canon of scripture. However, this text is being used in contemporary society as an instructional and formational text for girls and women. The character of the “virtuous woman” is one that is touted across Christendom as the model for women who aspire to be Christian examples of morality and righteousness (Lodge 2015). Women in many churches are taught that they must emulate the characteristics listed in Proverbs 31:10–31 if they want to be esteemed, honored, and recognized as women of worth. This means, then, that women who want to fit this paradigm cannot focus on themselves or their well-being, apart from their ability to take care of a spouse and children. They cannot rest, relax, or engage in hobbies or pleasurable activities that make them happy or fulfilled. They cannot sleep, lest they be portrayed as “idle”. Their sexuality must be hidden, even in marriage, and they are only honored as mothers if they bear children while married. How terribly unhealthy and unrealistic is all of this?

Most puzzling to me is the omission of her relationship with God. How spiritually unsound is a paradigm of “virtuous womanhood” built on a woman whose relationship with God is not even present in the text? When I realized that there was no reference in Proverbs 31:10–31 that mentioned the woman's spiritual formation or connection with God

as a part of her daily routine, I was shocked and dismayed. Prior to that, I had never heard anyone, woman or man, preach a sermon, nor read an article or book about this character that mentioned that her relationship with God is absent from the text. The writer refers to a woman who “fears the Lord”, but, in my opinion, that does not signify whether she has a relationship with God or personal investment in spiritual growth. Not only is the portrayal of this woman unhealthy and unrealistic; attempting to imitate her achievements is an unsound proposition for any believer, because the writer omits the one goal that believers are supposed to strive after—discipleship. Being a wonderful spouse and parent, astute businessperson, successful agrarian, excellent tailor, and philanthropist is amazing, but without spiritual insight and formation, is an individual growing and maturing as a disciple? Is it possible that spending some time with God would help this woman to know that she does not have to run from pillar to post, exhausting herself, to be virtuous in God’s sight? A different, more liberative interpretation of virtue could help free her and others like her.

This traditional paradigm of “virtuous womanhood” is what women, particularly Christian women (and girls), are constantly taught in sermons, books, articles, and media, and once this message is internalized, these women and girls bear the crushing weight of an unattainable achievement. They spend years, decades, even their whole adult lives, attempting to become a figure that not only does not exist, but should not exist, because she is unhealthy and unrealized. I have taught workshops and seminars on this topic, and women constantly tell me they struggle with trying to become a “virtuous woman”, only to feel like failures when they fall short. Others say they live double lives, feigning to be what they think is meant by “virtuous” while in church, but living their lives the way they choose outside the church. Some have abandoned any hope of meeting the goal of “virtuous womanhood”, which further instills feelings of insecurity, self-doubt, and low worth. I believe it is time to put the notion of “virtuous” womanhood to rest.

This article dismantles the patriarchal, cisheteronormative, misogynistic presentation of the Proverbs 31 woman as the model for virtuous womanhood, which does violence to girls and women from all walks of life, and replaces it with a liberative paradigm of personhood grounded in womanist ethics and spirituality.

First, I examine the concept of virtue. For centuries, the term “virtuous woman” has been used to categorize and marginalize women based on their behavior. Though written in ancient times to an ancient audience, Proverbs 31:10–31 has been brought into modern-day religious communities as a paradigm or plumb line against which women are measured for their virtue, morals, or “fitness” as wives and mothers. Women of every race, ethnicity, and culture, especially those who identify as Christian, are measured in some way by this paradigm, and many are pressured to aspire to this standard of womanhood. I address how this notion of “virtuous womanhood” has been misused and abused in the Church and call on the Church to account for its complicity in the historical marginalization and oppression of women. A large part of this history includes the patriarchal, traditional doctrines and views about women based on misogynistic biblical interpretations and religious traditions.

Second, I explore the two main female characters in Proverbs, “Lady” or “Woman Wisdom” and the “Strange Woman”. According to scholars, “Woman Wisdom” is the standard-bearer for Israelite/Jewish girls and women and the relationship goal of every Israelite/Jewish boy and man, whereas the “Strange Woman” is painted as the seductress/anti-heroine. I posit that both of these women exhibit positive characteristics that are glossed over in favor of modern stereotypical notions of “good” and “bad” girls. A deeper look at these characters, through the lenses of womanist radical subjectivity, hermeneutics of suspicion, and ethics of incarnation, has the potential to free them from one-dimensional understandings of virtue.

Third, I consider the paradigm of the Proverbs 31 woman. What are her characteristics, how is she described, and upon whom is she modeled? What makes her such a paragon of virtue, and why is she considered the standard by which virtuous women are measured? Employing a womanist ethic of wholeness (holistic being), I attempt to com-

mend the positive facets of her character while countering unhealthy, unrealistic notions of “virtue” present in her portrayal. Further, using a womanist radical concern for is-ness and spirituality, I deconstruct and demystify this paradigm of virtuous womanhood, first by problematizing the lack of rest and restoration available to her, then critiquing the lack of full personhood evident in her portrayal.

Finally, I offer a healthier way forward for women who have struggled to achieve the unattainable goal of “virtuous womanhood”, presenting a paradigm shift based on the four fundamental tenets of womanism that liberates and empowers women in their fullness, centers womanist spirituality and connection with the Divine, and has the potential to generate an authentic discipleship and a healthier, more robust way of living.

2. Proverbs 31 and the Concept of Virtue

Ever since Hebrew scholars and scribes translated Proverbs 31:10 as “Who can find a virtuous woman?”, people have been looking for this woman or attempting to become her. Why? What is so appealing about this character? Well, there seems to be much about her that is quite attractive, according to the rest of the chapter. Indeed, the KJV text continues in that verse, “. . .for her price is far above rubies”. Other translations call her a “wife of noble character” (NIV), an “excellent wife” (ESV, NASB), a “woman of strength” (NRSVUE), and a “good woman” (*The Message*). What makes this woman so valuable? According to the remainder of Proverbs 31:11–27 (NRSVUE):

¹¹ The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.

¹² She does him good and not harm all the days of her life.

¹³ She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands.

¹⁴ She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from far away.

¹⁵ She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her female servants.

¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

¹⁷ She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong.

¹⁸ She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.

¹⁹ She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.

²⁰ She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.

²¹ She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson.

²² She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.

²³ Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.

²⁴ She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.

²⁵ Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.

²⁶ She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

²⁷ She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

When I read the entirety of these descriptors, I become overwhelmed with the enormity of this woman’s responsibilities. However, it is easy to understand why she is considered so valuable, such a “woman of worth”, so “excellent” and “noble”. There is nothing she cannot and, apparently, does not do! We will look later in this article at the specifics of her

duties, but here, I examine the concept of “virtue”, particularly as it has been attributed to and translated from the Hebrew text.

According to scholar John Walton, the description of this “noble woman” can be considered a “human reflection of the Woman Wisdom, who represents God’s wisdom and even God” (Walton 2016). E.L. Lyons suggests that the picture of the *’ēšet-ḥayil* was that of the wise matriarch of the household. She was the natural counterpart to the paterfamilias—she was the materfamilias (Lyons 1987). The definition of “noble” includes “having high moral principles or ideals”, which would certainly include or point to wisdom as a desired attribute. The character of Woman Wisdom, which we will discuss in more detail in a later section, is replete with virtues affirmed by the writer of Proverbs, including knowledge, shrewdness, prudence, and skill. However, the way the word “virtuous” is read/interpreted in modern language does not equate with the translations listed above or with how contemporary scholars translate the Hebrew phrase. In fact, the word “virtue” does not appear in the English language until the 13th century, when it was defined as “moral life and conduct; a particular moral excellence” from the Anglo-French and Old French word “vertu”. The word “vertu”, in turn, was translated from the Latin *virtutem* (nominative *virtus*), meaning “moral strength, high character, goodness; manliness; valor, bravery, courage (in war)” (Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “Virtue” n.d.). Though these attributes may be included in that which people think of when they hear the word “virtue”, most often, is interpreted to mean sexual purity or chastity when applied to women. Interestingly enough, this definition of the word “virtue” did not come into regular use until the end of the 16th century. How, then, does this particular meaning become the prevailing one ascribed to the word “virtue”, especially when referring to women? And how does this interpretation become the basis of the character of the “virtuous woman” of Proverbs 31, especially in Christian churches in North America?

Part of the answer comes from the writers of Proverbs, themselves. As a book of instruction that scholars say emerged during the postexilic period, Proverbs contains wisdom sayings that are designed to instill “a strong sense of morality into the youth of the community, so as to ensure for them a stable life and future” (Franklin 2009, loc. 4533 of 6106, Kindle) and to help them become productive citizens. Further, Proverbs emphasizes the concept of “righteousness”. In Proverbs 14:34, the writer states, “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people”. Here, righteousness is defined as right dealing with God and community; any action that offends or harms God or one’s fellow human beings causes one to be out of right relationship and brings disapproval upon the individual or group perpetrating the offense.

The second part of the answer comes from the translations of the biblical text most available in the English colonies in North America in the 17th and 18th centuries. Both the *Geneva Bible*, published completely in 1560, and the King James Version of the Bible, published in 1611 (just over a decade after the word “virtue” begins to be defined as “sexual purity; chastity”), translate *’ēšet-ḥayil* as “virtuous woman”. The *Geneva Bible* was brought with the Pilgrims in 1620, and the King James Version made its way to America with later English settlers. Whether Puritan or Anglican, religious formation and instruction in these communities was overwhelmingly Protestant in theology and doctrine, which held that women were naturally inferior to men and beset by intellectual and spiritual weakness, which rendered them “unable to distinguish between good and evil and unable to assert their wills to follow the good” (Westerkamp 1999). Suzanne McCarthy notes,

A man who is called in Hebrew an *ish gibbor chayil*, or *gibbor chayil*, is often called a “mighty man of valor” or a “valiant man” in English Bibles. However, the *eshet chayil*, the woman of Prov 31, is called a “virtuous woman”, an “excellent wife”, or “a noble woman”. Although the vocabulary for men and women is similar in Hebrew, it differs in most English Bibles. In the Jewish Publication Society translation, however, *eshet chayil* is translated as “woman of valor”, a phrase that matches “man of valor”. (McCarthy 2019)

The conscious choice of biblical scholars to employ the phrase “virtuous woman” in these translations, rather than “noble woman” or “woman of strength”, speaks to an agenda that ensured women would comport themselves in religiously and socially acceptable ways. Scholars certainly would not have employed “woman of strength”, as “it connotes warrior language they would have deemed incompatible with the female gender”.¹ Scholars also contend that “the male writers would have reserved the descriptor, ‘noble’ for kings and queens, not women of lesser stature”.²

Though the biblical text in Proverbs 31:11–31 does not directly reference sexual purity or chastity, the attributes ascribed to the woman in this text definitely imply that she is a faithful wife, bringing honor to her husband, who “trusts her without reserve”. She is a reflection of Woman Wisdom, keeping her vows and commitments to family and community, avoiding even the appearance of folly, idleness, or reckless behavior. This characterization is the writers’ warning and proscription against the very behavior Israel exhibited that led to the nation being captured and taken into exile. Throughout the Hebrew bible, prophets issue oracles warning Israel of the consequences of being unfaithful to YHWH, plead with Israelite kings to avoid intermarriage and intermingling with foreign nations, especially foreign women, and refuse idol worship, all to no avail. Once the exile is over, the writers of Proverbs want the people to avoid any possibility of suffering exile again. Their intent is to construct a foundation for the new nation built on wisdom as “the way that leads to life” (Walton 2016). Though they present many of the proverbs in the form of parental instruction, the character of Woman Wisdom is also a central instructor. As previously mentioned, she serves as the standard-bearer for children, youth, men, and especially women who are or will become wives.

3. Patriarchy, the Church, and the Problems with Virtue as a Standard for Women

The trouble with the characterization of Woman Wisdom as a standard-bearer is that modern-day readers of the biblical text have read this character not as a metaphor but as an actual woman, particularly the woman in Proverbs 31:11–31. Most often, organizations, especially churches, point to the biblical text contained in Proverbs 31:10–31 as the “be-all and end-all” of virtuous womanhood. Girls and women in these organizations and faith communities are strongly encouraged and even admonished to emulate and aspire to embody every aspect of this character (Lucey 2021).

This is problematic for several reasons. First, as previously stated, this text was written millennia ago, in a time and to a people that had no concept of 21st-century Western society. Conversely, those who attempt to ascribe the attributes of the Proverbs 31 woman to women in contemporary society have little, if any, understanding of ancient Israelite society. Given the insidious nature of patriarchy, there may be some similarities in the ways women were perceived and treated in ancient Israel and in North America in the 17th and 18th centuries; however, these two contexts are not identical, and they are certainly not the same as 21st-century American society. Second, the most accurate translation of the Hebrew phrase *ʿēšet-ḥayil* is not “virtuous woman”, but rather “strong woman” or “strong wife”. Modern interpreters of the phrase have created an inaccurate portrait based on Victorian/Puritanical ideals of womanhood grounded in women’s inferiority, sexual purity, and genteel behavior. Certainly, the writers of Proverbs highlight her faithfulness to her husband and family, but they also paint her as industrious outside of the household, a businesswoman who monitors her daily routine, not someone who is relegated to the house, only has authority over her children, and is intellectually or spiritually weak.

A third problem with this depiction is that modern-day preachers, teachers, and authors use this one pericope in Proverbs as the consummate definition of wifely and motherly perfection. Countless sermons, bible studies, articles, and books have been produced that sing the praises of this woman and herald her as the ultimate standard for all women.³ Previously mentioned issues with the text notwithstanding, this assumes all women want or should want to be wives and mothers, and that this is the only type of wife and mother they should want to be. Further, many in modern-day society praise her

because her actions primarily benefit her husband without challenging his authority as the “head of the house”. Last, these prevailing and oft-espoused interpretations of “virtuous womanhood” are extremely narrow, limited, and limiting characterizations of women, focused on outward performance and reputation, not inner personhood and character. It is time women were disabused of these misleading notions, released from the androcentric shackles of being a so-called “virtuous woman”, and set free to be the women the Creator intended them to be.

4. Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman in Proverbs

Proverbs is written primarily from a father’s perspective to his son, teaching him the two paths of life—wisdom and folly. Bringing these paths to life are two characters—Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman. The first nine chapters of the book are centered on Woman Wisdom, her attributes and lessons. She is described as God’s companion, “with Him at the creation of the world”, and thus part of the foundation of everything that was created. Woman Wisdom uses seven pillars to build her “house”, which are seven feminine words that speak to the various facets of Wisdom: *torah*—instruction; *t’vunah*—understanding; *da’at*—knowledge; *armah*—shrewdness; *mezimah*—prudence/sound judgment; *tachbolet*—skill; and *melitzah*—a saying. If we examine the Proverbs 31 text, we see that each of these is present in the woman’s actions and attributes. All of these are prized in the Hebrew/Israelite household; there seems to be no problem with the woman exemplifying and employing all of these pillars to build her actual house. However, her use of these is limited to the building of her household for the benefit of her family; there is nothing present about her using these pillars to benefit herself or her well-being. That may not have been a problem in ancient Israel, because it may have been understood that she was well-cared for and attended to by her husband and children. Reciprocity in relationships may have been a given, although as a patriarchal society, it is also understood that married women occupied a particularly circumscribed place and role. For this reason, Woman Wisdom can neither be viewed identically by women in contemporary society nor held to identical descriptions or expectations.

Though Woman Wisdom’s attributes, particularly her embodiment of these seven pillars, were affirmed and even heralded by Israelite society, modern society does not necessarily affirm them in modern women, even for the benefit of their households. Men who are intimidated by smart, savvy women often do not want wives who exhibit an abundance of instruction, knowledge, understanding, or shrewdness, especially if her contribution is perceived as a desire for control in the relationship. Indeed, according to several online blogs and vlogs, these qualities can be seen as liabilities, and girls and women are often encouraged to “present themselves as docile and sweet if they want to attract potential male partners”⁴. Further, women who demonstrate prudence or sound judgment, especially in relationship matters, are often deemed “too masculine”, or they are told, “You don’t know how to let a man lead”. Independence, particularly financial independence, is often considered a liability and is viewed as merely a way for women to lord over men.⁵ These perspectives emerge from and help perpetuate misogynistic attitudes and fuel gender and sexual oppression of and violence against women. Though the Proverbs 31 woman is a wife and mother, she exhibits leadership characteristics and abilities in multiple respects, and she is applauded by her husband, children, and her community. These aspects of her character are often omitted in contemporary writings and sermons.

The Strange Woman stands in direct contrast to Woman Wisdom. Though she, too, is an Israelite, she does not conform to the socially accepted norms for wives. She is a seductress, tempting men through flattery and physical attraction. The father/parent who speaks to his son cautions him against becoming involved with this “loose” woman, warning that if he succumbs to her advances, she will lead him straight to his death. According to the text, the Strange Woman has forsaken her marital vows, and thus broken her covenant with her husband and with God. The Strange Woman is to be avoided at all costs, not because she is a foreigner, but because she is “willing to operate outside the

bounds of moral, legal, and customary restraints” (Keener and Walton 2019). Though sex outside of marriage with sex workers was not expressly forbidden for Israelite men, the committing of adultery, having sex with another man’s wife, was anathema to the Israelite community, as it would lead to death for the two adulterers involved. The Strange Woman, described as unchaste and apostate, is decried as a prostitute, “one who engages in sexual intercourse with no intention of a binding or enduring relationship” (Waltke 2004).

Though there seem to be no redeeming qualities for the Strange Woman, again, we must examine her character’s portrayal in modern society differently than when the text was written. As a book of instruction written to a community trying to rebuild itself as God’s people, the main objective of the Wisdom discourses in Proverbs is to develop a strong sense of morality in the youth of the community, so as to ensure for them a stable life and future that includes by necessity a rightful place in the community. I am not commending this character for her illicit behavior; rather, I am making the argument that when this character is discussed in sermons and bible studies, it often results in women being demonized as sexually immoral if they engage in extra-marital relations or exhibit sexual autonomy of any kind. And this judgment applies to all women engaging in extra-marital relations in church communities where this point of view is taken, whether the woman is engaged to be married and having consensual sex with her fiancé, is unmarried and in a committed, albeit unmarried, union, or having consensual sex with men who are also unmarried (Barbee n.d.). Ironically, there is rarely any proscription or warning against extra-marital relations for 21st-century men, married or not, as there is in the book of Proverbs (Mattson 2018). In the biblical text, the young man is being made responsible for his own actions and warned not to succumb to temptation, but in contemporary society, men are excused for their sexual activities, married or unmarried, and made to believe that, “As men, they can’t help themselves”.⁶ Contemporary women are blamed as harlots/sluts/Jezebels who cause men to sin, whether the woman is married or not. Women are to remain pure and chaste for marriage, whether or not they hold that as a religious or ethical standard for themselves; otherwise, they are categorized as whores and are seen as unworthy in those religious communities (Jones 2021). Again, these standards arise from patriarchal, misogynistic stereotypes that perpetrate violence against girls and women.

5. Hermeneutics of Suspicion, Liberation, and an Ethic of Incarnation

What do girls and women in these contemporary faith communities think about these interpretations of the Proverbs 31 text and the perceptions that arise from them? Many internalize the interpretation of the Proverbs 31 woman as an ideal, an aspiration to be achieved, or at least attempted, and spend their lives trying to attain it.⁷ They may have been introduced to this “ideal” in girlhood or adolescence as a part of church teachings; as part of this indoctrination, they may have been brought into purity culture, which advocates abstinence until marriage, particularly for girls (Mills 2023). Often, these girls and women have been taught the importance of adhering to church-approved gender roles and are cautioned against worldly, secular, or other cultural influences that counter these teachings.⁸ Girls and women who experience and internalize these teachings believe their worth comes from being able to mirror the abilities, attributes, and attitudes of the Proverbs 31 woman. If they can claim her wisdom, intelligence, astuteness, business acumen, mother wit, kindness, and generosity as their own, they will be prized above all others. If they can develop their gifts and talents, as well as their wifely and motherly abilities, to the level described in the text, they will be acclaimed by their spouses, children, and communities, *or*, if unmarried, they will attract spouses who will make it possible for them to be prized by family and friends alike.

Other women have tried to attain this “ideal”. They have been taught or read about being a Proverbs 31 woman and thought it was a worthwhile aspiration. However, they have discovered that the ideal is an illusion, an unattainable picture that does not truly exist (Welch 2023). For them, the Proverbs 31 woman paradigm is a source of angst, shame, depression, and/or anger. If they have tried to achieve this ideal, they have found it to

be too demanding, too time-consuming, too unrealistic for their lives, weighing them down and making them feel a sense of failure. Unmarried women who have adopted this paradigm thinking it would attract spouses have also felt bamboozled when marriage does not materialize, or if it does materialize, their spouses do not afford them the same personal autonomy or social standing as the text does, or they are not praised for being Proverbs 31 women (Nelson 2020).

Womanist hermeneutics and ethics can help women who have found the Proverbs 31 paradigm to be an unhealthy, unrealistic goal. Womanism carries with it a *hermeneutics of suspicion*, which “. . .explore the liberating or oppressive values and visions inscribed in the text by identifying the androcentric-patriarchal character and dynamics of the text and its interpretations” (Fiorenza 1992). Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas offers this insight:

Given the fact that various biblical texts do indeed lend themselves to oppressive interpretations, and thus can set in motion a biblical tradition of terror, we are compelled to adopt a certain “hermeneutic of suspicion” in the way we use and interpret the Bible. This hermeneutic should reflect the preferred perspective and preferential moral agency of the underside. Inasmuch as any text or interpretation of a text diminishes the life and freedom of any people, then those texts and/or interpretations must be held under “suspicion”, critically reevaluated and perhaps lose authority. (Douglas 2015)

This method of critical analysis is inherent in the methods of womanist ethics and biblical hermeneutics employed by early womanist scholars and is used to describe how African Americans and other people of color may approach, read, and critique the biblical text and oppressive interpretations often posited by preachers and teachers. Employing a hermeneutics of suspicion means reading textual commentaries⁹ that provide historical, literary, textual, contextual, and contemporary criticisms that can uncover multiple agendas, as well as reading scholarly critiques that problematize how texts have been interpreted, taught, and proclaimed. Rather than simply accepting what is preached and taught, readers who employ a hermeneutics of suspicion are able to weigh and measure what they have heard with what they have read, discern what contemporary agendas might be at play, and decide for themselves what to accept or reject. Using a hermeneutics of suspicion, readers of the Proverbs 31 text can be aware of how and why the characters of Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman are portrayed as they are, while noting that both characters embody certain levels of autonomy and agency that can be liberative, if employed in life-giving ways.

Ethicist and mother of Womanist theology Katie Geneva Cannon laid the groundwork for constructing alternative sites of ethical and theological authority that inform a liberative paradigm for reading and understanding the biblical text, as well as theologies, doctrines, and dogma that arise from its interpretations. New Testament scholar Clarice J. Martin’s work examines “multiple, interlocking ideologies and systems of hegemony within the biblical tradition and calls for recovery, analysis, and reconstruction of texts, while documenting the effects of biblical interpretation on African and African diasporic peoples” (Martin 1999). Womanist scholar Delores Williams advocates a “womanist survivalist/quality-of-life theology which holds liberation as the goal, but acknowledges that, while striving to achieve liberation, Black women—and the communities they uplift—must experience survival and prosperity, even in the midst of their oppressors” (Allen-McLaurin 2021a). This hermeneutic can provide Black faith communities a lens with which to critique “the liability of its habit of using the Bible in an uncritical and sometimes too self-serving way” (Williams 1993).

These womanist hermeneutics of liberation can help readers wrestle with the agendas inherent in the Proverbs 31 text, in both original and contemporary contexts. Questions that center around the woman’s mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being help the reader see behind the text and consider what other factors may have a bearing on how she is portrayed. Further, hermeneutics of liberation help readers view the text in a contemporary light to see how using it as a standard for 21st-century women is anachronistic, unrealistic,

unhealthy, and even dangerous for women. Holding girls and women to a blanket religious standard written thousands of years ago does violence to them and causes immeasurable damage, undermining and even compromising their abilities to think and act for themselves. Womanist liberative ethics and hermeneutics deconstruct and provide correctives to these toxic, death-dealing standards.

Womanist ethicist Eboni Marshall Turman writes:

“Christian communities often find themselves unable to escape the circularity of human oppression because they are rooted in a narrative that seemingly suggests that the body that defies normative wholeness must be dehumanized and choreographed to adhere to a specific narrative, one that ascribes to a binary hierarchy of sorts that too often divinizes certain kinds of flesh, while demonizing others”. (Turman 2013)

I contend that the contemporary interpretation and presentation of the Proverbs 31 woman paradigm encapsulates Marshall Turman’s argument completely. The Christian Church has demonized women for centuries, dating back to early Church councils that honored and deified Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a sainted virgin while misinterpreting, castigating, and marginalizing Mary Magdalene for being a sinful woman (Jones 2021). Pauline texts based on Platonic/Hellenistic dualities between spirit (good) and flesh (bad) underscored and helped birth these narratives and perpetuate them until the divide between flesh and spirit was developed into theological tenets and, ultimately, Church doctrines. This compartmentalization of *being* has wreaked havoc on humanity, particularly women, and especially Black women, for millennia, and it continues to do so in tropes such as the Madonna/Whore complex, Mammy, Sapphire, and the Strong/Angry Black Woman. Women, particularly Black women, are categorized either as “good” or “bad” based on stereotypical notions of behavior. If a woman is confident and assured, she is often viewed negatively as arrogant. If she speaks up for herself and asserts her own agency, she is mouthy, aggressive, bossy, or “doesn’t know her ‘place’”. If she is comfortable in her own body and with her sexuality, she is “fast” or “loose”. However, it is ironic that the Proverbs 31 woman as portrayed in the text embodies all of these traits. Nevertheless, in many modern retellings and interpretations of this text, women are encouraged to be sweet, docile, subordinate, and subservient to their spouses, content with being homemakers and caretakers of children only, none of which is depicted in the description of the Proverbs 31 woman.

The core issue here is that women are primarily viewed in modern society by what they *do*, not by who they are inherently. Perceptions about a woman’s behavior, her worth as a female, which is determined by her marital and parental status, her ability to contribute to society, and whether she is a threat to society are all based on superficial, capitalistic, transactional models of existence, rooted in white supremacist notions of being and doing.¹⁰ Ignorance about, fear of, and a subsequent need to control women’s bodies are at the heart of these perceptions, which are mirrored in the Church in biblical and theological doctrines and their interpretations. (To be certain, the biblical text is a foundational purveyor of this control, but the Church is also guilty of misinterpreting, teaching, and preaching texts in ways that the original authors never meant them to be).

A womanist ethic of incarnation can help free women from these toxic doctrines and perceptions. Theologian M. Shawn Copeland offers three convictions about theological anthropology and the *enfleshing* of created spirit that are particularly liberative: (1) human beings, created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*), have a distinct capacity for communion with God; (2) human beings have a unique place in the cosmos God created; and (3) human beings are made for communion with other living beings (Copeland 2010). These three convictions, if internalized, can help deconstruct and dismantle harmful stereotypes/tropes about women, do away with the idea of women as second-class citizens, and liberate women from anxiety, shame, or anger regarding oppressive standards based on erroneous and problematic biblical and theological interpretations.

6. Who Is the Proverbs 31 Woman?

Let us now examine who this woman is, according to the biblical text. She is described as being trustworthy, never spiteful, industrious, organized, business-savvy, a diligent worker, never idle, skilled in crafts that benefit her household, a first-rate seamstress, a thoughtful and kind speaker, always ready to help others, and astutely aware of all that goes on in her household. What does this woman do all day? She shops, buying fabrics and fields with money she has saved. She cooks for her family and does household chores. She knits and sews clothes, both for her family and to sell in the marketplace. She makes sure that everyone in her household is busy and productive, like she is! How is she perceived and treated by her family? The text states, “The heart of her husband trusts in her” (Prov. 31:11), and “he praises her: ‘Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all’” (Prov. 31:28-29). Her children “rise up and call her happy” (Prov. 31:28). Though the text does not state specifically how her community perceives and treats her, because she is described as kind and always ready to help those in need, she is more than likely perceived as a woman of worth and as an exemplar to women in the community.

What could anyone find to critique about this woman or how she is portrayed? She seems to be perfect; she never makes any mistakes, never has a negative emotion, never fights with her spouse, never yells at her children, and seemingly never has a problem! And that is the problem. This woman is not real; she could not be, because real women are human, meaning they are imperfect. Moreover, real women experience all human emotions, including sadness, grief, and anger. Real women voice differences of opinion that may lead to arguments with friends and family members, including spouses or partners. Real women do not always get along with everyone. Real women who are mothers do not have every moment of every day scheduled for productivity; they do not have all the answers to every question. Their children are not perfect models or examples of perfect parenting, and they certainly do not “rise up and call them happy” every day. No one person is handy, skilled, savvy, or talented at everything at all times. Nor is any person industrious twenty-four hours of the day. I contend, therefore, that the first order of business for dealing with this character as a paradigm is to consider that this is not an actual woman. Rather, it seems to me that this character is a composite of characteristics that King Lemuel’s mother, the original speaker in Proverbs 31, desires in a woman who would be her son’s wife. The chapter begins with her admonishment,

“² No, my son! No, son of my womb! No, son of my vows!

³ Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings”.
(Prov. 31:2-3)

She is warning him about the dangers of being seduced and overtaken by women who would seek to destroy him, clearly a reference to the “Strange Woman” character in Proverbs. Attributes such as generosity, kindness, industriousness, and astuteness echo the character of Woman Wisdom, who, as previously stated, is the standard bearer for all Israelite womanhood. This woman is a metaphor for girls and women to emulate as they live into society’s acceptable notions of wife- and motherhood.

The Proverbs 31 woman embodies attributes that can certainly be life-giving and life-affirming. There is nothing inherently wrong with being generous, astute, helpful, industrious, talented, savvy, etc. However, a serious problem occurs when this character is used as a plumb line for women, as an example of the ultimate or perfect wife and mother. When these characteristics are the only ones that are mentioned in the text, and the text is interpreted literally, girls and women are taught that this is who they are to strive to be, in total. There is no room for other characteristics, feelings, or abilities. No space is created for the totality or range of human emotions, for talents and abilities that do not contribute to the welfare of a household, or even for girls and women who are not or do not wish to be wives or mothers. Granted, the Proverbs 31 woman is a businessperson, but her wealth goes to upbuild her husband and children. Nowhere in the text does it say that she engages in transactions that benefit or please her alone. She is a seamstress and

agrarian, but nowhere does it say that she does any of this for pleasure or pure enjoyment. She is never idle, nor does her lamp go out at night, so she never rests or relaxes. Perhaps in ancient Israel, this character was understood metaphorically; she may have even been considered an aspirational ideal in post-exilic Israelite society, but in 21st-century America, this woman and her descriptions are translated into a dangerous, unrealistic paradigm used to measure the worth of women.

7. Shifting the Paradigm

How can womanist theology help us dismantle this dangerous paradigm, extract what is useful, and discard what is not? If we examine the text using the four tenets of womanism—radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, critical engagement, and redemptive self-love—we can deconstruct and critique the Proverbs 31 woman paradigm while offering these tenets as helpful tools for building lives of joy, self-care, and liberation.

8. Radical Subjectivity

Alice Walker defined radical subjectivity as “Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one. Responsible. In charge. Serious” (Walker 1983). Immediately, the reader of Proverbs 31:10–31 knows this definition does not refer to the woman portrayed in the text. There is nothing outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful about her. Or is there? Though the Proverbs 31 woman may be doing all she is doing for the benefit of her husband and household, she is portrayed as moving and working independently. She is not confined to the house, but goes into town, to marketplaces, out into the countryside, and she has some autonomy over her life. She is pictured as a businessperson, a negotiator, someone who is capable of buying and selling profitably, which, in a patriarchal society, is no small feat. However, her actions are quite circumscribed and approved by her husband; there is no outrageous or willful behavior. She is a woman of wisdom, and therefore, her actions all fall within the scope of what is acceptable for a proper Israelite wife.

In 21st-century churches in which the Proverbs 31 woman is extolled, women who want to be deemed “proper” or “godly” are expected to behave similarly. Though men in these churches may agree that women should be allowed to conduct business outside the home, this is only for the benefit of her household, and whatever she is doing should be first approved by her husband. There certainly would be no room for a woman patterning herself after the Proverbs 31 woman to stop in a restaurant or bar and have a drink, alone or with friends, to buy anything outside the realm of regular household expenditures, even if she bought it with money earned from selling clothes she made, or to purchase her own property. Further, the interpretation of her focus on home, husband, and children precludes any modern would-be Proverbs 31 woman from behaving in any way unseemly or unfit for a wife and mother. She must comport herself with dignity and avoid making a spectacle of herself, lest she be categorized as a “Jezebel”, “Strange Woman”, or in the more modern phrase, “for the streets”. This text does not offer particular admonishments against having fun but does reference the woman not being idle, which in modern-day churches is communicated to women as a proscription against having idle time and/or recreational pursuits.

Walker’s definition of radical subjectivity decries these notions of “dignity” and “proper behavior” by affirming audacious and willful behavior. The affirmation of behaving outside the safety of “what is good for oneself” is one most girls and women never hear applied to them. Boys and men are often encouraged to be rowdy, bodacious, brazen daredevils. Very seldom is a man’s behavior ever checked; “boys will be boys” becomes “he is just being a man”. (It is no wonder there is no comparable male counterpart to the Proverbs 31 woman.) What would it mean for girls and women to be free to be themselves anywhere, at all times, and in all spaces? What would it look like for female personhood to be affirmed in all her beauty and bravery? What kind of freedom would it take for girls and women to laugh and live out loud, to be able to take chances and risks, personally

and professionally, without being judged or categorized? The Proverbs 31 woman could certainly benefit from internalizing radical subjectivity; she could enjoy all that she does while doing something just for herself. She might even rise up and call herself “happy”.

9. Traditional Communalism

“Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally capable”. (Walker 1983)

At first glance, the Proverbs 31 woman embodies traditional communalism in full. She is described as one who readily gives to those in need, who speaks wisely and kindly to all. She engages with her community as she goes about her day, shopping and selling, and one would assume that because she is a well-respected woman, she conducts her business in a fair and equitable manner. She cares for her family and ensures they engage society in a productive manner, and she cares for those who serve her and her household. However, there is no mention of the Proverbs 31 woman’s relationship with her husband and her children. We are told that her husband praises her, and her children call her “happy”, but the writer does not give any specific details about the inner workings of their relationships. Do she and her husband like one another? Do they have shared interests other than their children? Is he kind to her? Does he assist her in the various tasks she completes each day? Do they argue? Are her children difficult to manage? Do they respect and treat her well? It may be understood that in ancient Israel, kindness and assistance was not expected from a male spouse, or perhaps the writer assumes the reader knows that her husband treated her well by reading the words of his praise. Again, as a story of an exemplary woman, the writer may not have meant this narrative to be taken literally, but rather as a broad picture of household life for righteous women. However, for those in the 21st century who do take the story literally, it is a heavy weight for women to bear. The missing elements of how the woman is cared for, treated, and actively loved by her husband and children are used to justify the idea that women should be happy, loving, and caring for spouses and children whether that love and care is reciprocated or not.

Further, the seeming perfection of the Proverbs 31 woman’s household also becomes an expectation for contemporary women, and if they cannot achieve that perfection, they are made to feel like failures. If her husband is not perceived as respectable, she is not building him up enough; she is not supporting him enough. If her children act disruptive or disorderly, she is to blame for not raising or disciplining them well. Moreover, in faith communities in which this paradigm is touted as the ultimate goal for women, this is how a woman’s worth is measured—by how well her spouse and children appear to be doing (and whether she has a spouse and children). Traditional communalism as a practice calls for the entire community to be committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, female and male. As much as the Proverbs 31 woman is taking care of others, she should be taken care of in like manner.

Walker’s definition of traditional communalism also references separating oneself, periodically, for health. The Proverbs 31 woman is not described as taking any time apart for her own well-being. She seems to be constantly working and tending to the needs of her family. She is not depicted as resting, relaxing, or even sleeping. The text states that “her lamp does not go out at night”! Contemporary women who aspire to be Proverbs 31 women are taught that they are to always be engaged in worthwhile pursuits, which are narrowly defined as work that benefits their spouse and children. Taking breaks, taking solo vacations or girls’ trips, or engaging in any kind of self-care is often out of the question and is considered selfish, even dangerous. Women are told that their place is in the home, and if they managed their homes correctly, they would not need breaks or vacations away from family. Once again, this is a narrative meant to control female personhood under the guise of moral righteousness. Internalizing a complete sense of traditional communalism would free women from the idea that they must pour themselves out until they are empty. They would discover that while they are pouring, they should be poured into by their families and communities. Further, they would discover that self-care, including time away

from loved ones in solitude, rest, and recreation, is essential to building themselves back up so they are able to continue giving and caring.

10. Critical Engagement

“Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender”.

(Walker 1983)

Irie Lynne Sessions offers an explanation of critical engagement that I believe is extremely helpful for understanding Walker’s statement: “Critical engagement. . . concerns itself with systemic issues that undergird the perpetuation of the tripartite intersection of race, sex, and class oppression” (Sessions 2015). *Intersectionality*, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics “intersect” with one another and overlap, helps people, women in particular, acknowledge, navigate, and critique the ways in which these systemic issues intersect and have multiple impacts and effects on daily lives. Though there is no reference to oppression in the text, the Proverbs 31 woman is directly affected by her place in Israelite society, as a woman, Jew, wife, mother, and woman of some social standing. The oppression she faces is inherent in her place in society, in the weight of responsibilities, and in the expectations of “upright” behavior she must model. This oppression is perpetrated and perpetuated in 21st-century faith communities when this narrative is heralded as the highest aspiration for girls and women to attain.

Twenty-first-century women still face societal oppression as women, and they still encounter preconceived notions in many faith communities about what wives and mothers should be and do. As Sessions notes, for Black women, societal oppression is often quadrupled because of the added systemic issues of racism, classism, ageism, ableism, and gender issues on top of sexism. Black women face even harsher, and sometimes violent, responses to their desires to live in the fullness of their personhood. Long-standing racist and sexist societal tropes of Black women as mammies, harlots, Jezebels, and “angry” and “strong” women marginalize and paint Black women as unworthy of love and care. Unfortunately, even in many faith communities, Black women are categorized by these stereotypical notions and are then encouraged (and even instructed) to embody the Proverbs 31 woman paradigm to “overcome” being viewed as “less-than”. Black women are told, “If you would just soften your personality, lower your voice, stop dressing so seductively, stay home, submit to your husband/male authority, focus on your children, engage in ‘constructive’ pursuits, etc., you would be much happier, you would be taken seriously, you could find a mate, you would find your purpose” (Padua n.d.). Womanist critical engagement helps to disavow us and others of these erroneous and harmful notions. When we can see and understand tropes, stereotypes, and societal expectations as part of the intersections of multiple oppressions that have been placed on us by those seeking to control and disembody us, we can begin to deconstruct narratives and paradigms (like the Proverbs 31 woman) that continue to bind, diminish, and dismiss Black women and all women.

11. Redemptive Self-Love

Perhaps the most important Womanist tenet in deconstructing the modern interpretation of the Proverbs 31 woman is redemptive self-love. Walker defines/describes redemptive self-love thusly: “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless” (Walker 1983). This description of a woman/womanist serves to set women and all people free. Though the Proverbs 31 woman does a lot, we do not really know who she *is*. We do not know who she desires to be or what is of the utmost importance or essence to her being. She is never given voice in the text; we never hear from her directly; therefore, we have no way of knowing how she truly feels about herself, her spouse, her family, or her community. She is described as behaving in a certain manner, from which we may infer that she is dedicated to fulfilling certain expectations, but we cannot know definitely what she thinks, feels, or desires.

This silencing happens to contemporary women constantly, particularly those in faith communities that consign women to second-class/helpmeet status. Like children, women are expected to be seen (especially seen working diligently), but not heard. What is so interesting here is that the Proverbs 31 woman is not silent; clearly, she talks to others as she goes about her day. But she is silenced on the matters of her own mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being. Society does not care much if women talk, as long as they are talking in ways that affirm the status quo, as long as what they are saying underscores the superiority of men and accepts their own marginalization. But the moment women begin to affirm themselves, to love themselves in demonstrative ways that go against what is considered acceptable behavior, there is a problem.

Walker's description of redemptive self-love would be problematic for any who uphold the marginalization of women, for it affirms that women love themselves, *regardless*, and in most societies, women are only "loved" if they are behaving in socially acceptable ways. Women are sometimes castigated if they celebrate themselves, if they acknowledge their own beauty and magnificence; they are called arrogant and full of themselves. Some women have even been threatened with violence if they reject men's advances or attention (Pettine 2018). The overarching narrative in these situations is that women are not supposed to be confident in their own beauty, talents, abilities, or self-awareness. They are supposed to be meek, docile, appreciative, and accepting of their lot in life. Redemptive self-love communicates the opposite—that women can and should dance, eat, love their rounded bodies, love who they want to love, and, most of all, love themselves, *regardless*. Rather than affirming aspirations to be a Proverbs 31 woman, redemptive self-love asks, "Do I love myself enough to be who I already am?" If the answer is "No", redemptive self-love asks, "Why don't I?", followed by "What would it take for me to love my truest self"?

12. "Is-Ness" and Spirituality

As previously mentioned, there is nothing stated in the text about the Proverbs 31 woman's relationship with God. The writer inserts a generic statement about praising women who fear the Lord at the conclusion of the chapter, but there is no specific reference to the woman's religious inclinations or her spirituality. In all that she does during the week, worship, corporate or personal, is not mentioned. Perhaps the writer assumes that the community knows this woman's religious habits, so it is not important to state them outright. However, in modern faith communities, I believe it is just as—if not more—important to explore and highlight her spirituality (or lack thereof) as it is the dozens of tasks she accomplishes daily. Though much is made of her duties and responsibilities and the excellent way in which she conducts her personal life and business, nothing is said in the text about how she conducts or manages her spiritual connection with the Holy.

What is also problematic is that when this text is preached to women, the assumption is that if a woman is godly (whatever the description of godly is in that context), she will be able to accomplish all that the Proverbs 31 woman does. In fact, the stronger her relationship with God, the better able she is to become a perfect version of the Proverbs 31 woman. But rarely is there any specificity about how women are to mature spiritually; actually, what is generally preached is that if women would concern themselves with home and hearth, their spirituality would automatically deepen, and they would find themselves closer to God (Miller n.d.). And perhaps that is also what the writer of Proverbs believed and meant to convey in the chapter. But making oneself busy with housework and parenting does not automatically create spiritual maturity, and in reality, it has nothing to do with spirituality or one's relationship with God. Moreover, contemporary society has shown that one can become so consumed with daily tasks and responsibilities, especially involving housework and parenting, that one's relationship with God actually suffers.

It is my contention that what is missing most from the Proverbs 31 text is a realized spirituality, one that is voiced and exemplified in the woman's understanding of herself, in a radical concern for "is-ness". Is-ness is defined by "a primary concern for concrete existence and a holistic relationship between body, soul, and creation" (Allen-McLaurin

2021b). The intersectionality referenced earlier not only applies to systems of oppression, but also to systems of existence that merge and converge within and around us. How does this woman view, perceive, and affirm her own life? Is it merely through the doing of things, the accomplishment of goals, the achievement of tasks? How does she define, navigate, and grow her spiritual being? What religious and spiritual formation activities help her to assess and achieve growth?

Womanist scholar and practitioner Emilie Townes defines womanist spirituality in part as “concrete, particular, universal, relevant, relentless, self-critical, and communal” (Townes 1995b). She encourages us to explore God’s presence as “the very fabric of our existence, a divine and sustaining reality in our lives, leaving us free to re-image God as our ancestors did—as immanent and transcendent Spirit that is at once present with and within us” (Townes 1995a). Then, we become co-creators with Spirit, able to sing, pray, dance, preach, and work for the good of our communities, even as we care for ourselves, individually. What proponents of the Proverbs 31 paradigm might be shocked to discover it that it is not one’s behavior that has the power to bring one closer to God; rather, one’s relationship with God is what has the power to impact, challenge, and change our sense of “is-ness” that, in turn, has the power to affect what we do and how we do it. God does not love us because of the completion of a household laundry list of tasks, or even because we adhere to a religious laundry list of do’s and don’ts. God loves us because God made us, and made us *good*, in our whole personhood.

13. Conclusions

What shall we say to these things? In light of what we know, should the Proverbs 31 woman paradigm still be the aspirational ideal for women in contemporary society? Based on the above argument, the answer is a resounding “No”. Even though many faith-based communities and organizations are still encouraging women to strive continuously to achieve this unattainable ideal, I contend that the Proverbs 31 woman paradigm is unrealistic, dangerous, and death-dealing. This is not because women should not embody similar characteristics or skills as the Proverbs 31 woman; rather, it is because most modern religious interpretations of this character are being used to do violence to girls and women by justifying marginalization, oppression, and control of their bodies, minds, and spirits.

How can we overcome this violent agenda? I advocate the embrace and internalization of womanist theologies, hermeneutics, and ethics that have the power to deconstruct, dismantle, and liberate women and men from these oppressive paradigmatic notions. Radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, critical engagement, and redemptive self-love provide correctives to perilous misinterpretations and misapplications of the Proverbs 31 text and offer life-giving alternatives with myriad implications. To read the text—any text, but particularly biblical texts—with womanist theologies, hermeneutics, and ethics calls for open-mindedness, courage, and a willingness to listen to and dialogue with women scholars, writers, artists, and activists who will challenge, critique, and contradict prevailing notions that may be held dear. But if women are going to be free, and if women and men are going to commit themselves to doing the work of overcoming the violence done to women over millennia of time in and through religious and societal oppression, we must be willing to listen, hear, and share counter-narratives that center liberative voices. It is time to discard the “virtuous woman” ideal and instead open our eyes, minds, and spirits to that which women avow for themselves in seeking to be who the Creator has made them to be *Ashe*.

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Notes

¹ Vanessa Lovelace (Hebrew bible scholar) in discussion with Lisa Allen-McLaurin, 15 May 2022.

² Kimberly Russaw (Hebrew bible scholar) in discussion with Lisa Allen-McLaurin, 15 May 2022.

- 3 The amount of resources available that herald the virtues of the Proverbs 31 woman are too numerous to cite here. However, I have listed a few of the ones offered by nationally recognized preachers and/or ministries (Jakes n.d.; Hubbard 2020; The Proverbs 31 Ministries Podcast n.d.; George 2017).
- 4 Some of these include Battista (2019), Goudreau (2010), and recorded sermons/vlogs (Evans n.d.; Dowell n.d.).
- 5 These include Steve Harvey's book (Harvey 2009), as well as the following articles, blogs, and vlogs: (Fox 2016; Why Men Must Lead a Relationship to Avoid Losing It 2021; Ladies, If You Want a Healthy Relationship, You Have to Let a Good Man Lead 2016).
- 6 Two sources that deal directly with how the church has perpetrated sexual violence on women while excusing men for their illicit behaviors are (West 2018; LeMoncheck 1997).
- 7 Several conferences focused on becoming a Proverbs 31 Woman occur yearly in the United States, including, *Proverbs 31 Woman Club & Conference*, hosted by founder Chrystal Bernard, <https://www.chrystalbernard.com/proverbs31womanclub> (accessed on 24 June 2023); *Who Can Find a Proverbs 31 Woman Conference*, hosted by founder Kimberly Benjamin, <https://www.smores.com/v1yd7-proverbs-31-woman-conference> (accessed on 24 June 2023); and the *She Speaks Conference*, hosted by Lysa TerKeurst, founder of *Proverbs 31 Ministries*, shespeaksconference.com (accessed on 24 June 2023).
- 8 Two examples of this teaching are online sermons (Evans n.d.; Loritts n.d.).
- 9 Commentaries I have found particularly helpful in this regard include the following: Page (2009), Gaventa and Petersen (2010), Waltke (2005), Bartlett and Taylor (2009).
- 10 Please see Cannon (2003, pp. 69–70) and Hersey (2022, pp. 11–12).

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