

*The Economy of  
Ancient Judah in  
Its Historical Context*

*edited by*

MARVIN LLOYD MILLER, EHUD BEN ZVI,  
and GARY N. KNOPPERS

Winona Lake, Indiana  
EISENBRAUNS  
2015

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*Front cover:* Photo of silver-coated bronze Persian-period coin by Pavel Shargo, the Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of Archaeology, © Lautenschlaeger Azekah Expedition survey. Azekah imitation of Greek tetradrachma. Obverse: image of Athena; reverse: owl. Mid-5th to mid-4th century B.C.E. Cover design by Andy Kerr.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

The economy of ancient Judah in its historical context / edited by  
Marvin Lloyd Miller, Ehud Ben Zvi, and Gary N. Knoppers.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-1-57506-413-0 (hardback : alk. paper)

1. Economics in the Bible. 2. Finance—Biblical teaching.  
3. Bible. Old Testament—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 4. Jews—  
Economic conditions—History—586 B.C.–70 A.D. I. Miller, Marvin  
Lloyd, editor. II. Ben Zvi, Ehud, 1951—editor. III. Knoppers,  
Gary N., 1956—editor.

BS1199.E35E26 2015

221.6'7—dc23

2015031483

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984. ©™

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*The “Successful, Wise, Worthy Wife” of  
Proverbs 31:10–31 as a Source for Reconstructing  
Aspects of Thought and Economy in the Late  
Persian / Early Hellenistic Period*

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*Introduction*

Studies conducted in the last decades on Prov 31:10–31 have contributed a great deal to a better understanding of the text and the portrayal of the successful, wise, worthy wife at its very center.<sup>1</sup> They have dealt with literary composition and structure (Lichtenstein 1982: 202–11; Hurowitz 2001: 209–18)<sup>2</sup> and addressed, inter alia, gender (Camp 1985: 90–94, 186–208; Fischer 2005: 237–53; cf. Valler 1995: 85–97), imagery (Szlos 2000: 97–103; Novick 2009: 107–13), anthropology (Lang 2004b: 188–207), socioeconomics (Yoder 2001; 2003: 427–47), text criticism (Rofé 2002: 145–55),<sup>3</sup> form criticism (Wolters 1988: 446–57; Nwaoru 2005: 41–66), and various combinations of these matters.<sup>4</sup> In addition, they have been informed by comparative studies with ancient Near Eastern texts (Hurowitz 2005: 221–34), classical texts (esp. Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*; Waegeman 1992: 101–7; Lang 2004b),<sup>5</sup> Ottoman households (Lang 2004a: 140–57), Yoruba *oriki*/recitals (Nwaoru 2005), and Indian parallels (Luke 1991: 131–32).

My contribution to this vast area of studies is from the perspective of a historian of the world of the thought and memory of ancient Israel.

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1. For an excellent study of this pericope, which also includes a survey and critique of most of these studies, see Fox 2009: 882–917.

2. It may be mentioned that readings of Prov 31:10–31 as being closely linked to Prov 31:1–9 have a long history. Yefet ben ‘Eli (10th century) maintained that the author of Prov 31:10–31 was the mother of Lemuel—whom he identified with Bathsheba. The proposal for a female authorship of Prov 31:10–31 is noteworthy. On Yefet ben ‘Eli’s reading of this pericope, see Sasson 2013: 175–76.

3. Compare with Rofé’s contribution by the same title published in Hebrew in Talshir, Yona, and Sivan 2001: 382–90.

4. In fact, all the works mentioned thus far could easily have been included in more than one category. This is the case because, in reality, none of these categories excludes the others, and scholars usually deal with multiple issues and approaches.

5. On Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*, see, e.g., Pomeroy 1994.

Moreover, since the world of thought does not exist in a vacuum, totally unrelated to historical contingencies, and since even imagination must emerge from a “real” world, I conclude with some observations about the ways in which this ideal image may shed light on economy and society in Yehud.

It is obvious that the imagined, remembered, and certainly utopian (from the perspective of the readers) the *אשת־חיל* portrayed in Prov 31:10–31<sup>6</sup> did not provide a representative portrayal of the activities of historical, average wives in the late Persian / early Hellenistic period in Yehud/Judah—or for that matter, in any period.<sup>7</sup> Instead, it constructed within the community an ideal site of memory. The *אשת־חיל* became the embodiment of an exemplar.<sup>8</sup> It served processes of socialization within the relevant social group and as a socially approved, guiding lighthouse for single men navigating the sea of marital matchmaking, and likely also for future brides (Crook: 1954: 137–40; Luke 1991; Nwaoru 2005; Fox 2009: 905) within the same group, learning about what they should do to become wives who both were a treasure and created a treasure

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6. As the title of this contribution shows, I am rendering *אשת־חיל* a “successful, wise, worthy wife.” This is just an attempt to convey a more substantial portion of the semantic realm of *אשת־חיל*. Rofé (2002) influences this translation to some extent. Many other renderings have been offered, e.g., “capable wife/woman,” “valiant wife/woman,” “wife/woman of valor,” “wife/woman of substance,” “wife/woman of worth,” “wife/woman who is a treasure,” “wife/woman of strength,” “excellent wife/woman,” or one may even think of “wonder-wife/woman.”

Within the pair “wife”–“woman,” the preferred term is often “woman,” but since the married status of the *אשת־חיל* plays an important part in her characterization and in the ways in which she was imagined and remembered in the late Persian/early Hellenistic period, I find the term “wife” to be historically more precise. This said, I am aware of concerns related to today’s use of biblical text—in settings other than academic attempts to reconstruct a historical past—that have been raised about translations such as the one I am suggesting. See, e.g., Yilibuw 1996: 30–32. The goal of this contribution, however, is to advance a (construction of a historically reasonable) reconstruction of the ancient world of thought. Within the world of thought (and memory and imagination) of the literati of Persian or early Hellenistic Yehud/Judah, the *אשת־חיל* was certainly imagined as a married heterosexual woman and a mother as well. For some lists of translations and brief discussion, see, e.g., Hurowitz 2005: esp. p. 221.

7. The point is actually partially conceded by the text itself, as it frames the beginning of the pericope with a rhetorical question. On this issue, compare, for instance, Fox 2009: 890–91; Hausmann 1992: 262; and Fischer 2006: 149.

8. The community reading and rereading the text remembers her, her attributes, actions, and her world. As the process continues, the *אשת־חיל* becomes a site of memory, and I would add, an important site of memory within the community. See below.

and to inculcate a direct correspondence between the two—namely, being and creating a treasure.

Before we explore some aspects of the underlying world of thought reflected and communicated by אשת־חיל, two preliminary considerations are in order. First, there is the matter of dating the relevant text. Obviously, if it did not exist during the late Persian / early Hellenistic period in Judah/Yehud, it cannot help us shed much light on this period. But there is a general agreement on dating this text within that range.<sup>9</sup> Of course, there are many attempts to narrow the range for the composition of the text, but the arguments in favor of more-precise dates are not necessarily conclusive (Fox 2009: 899–902). In any event, for the present purposes, given the long-term, basic continuity of the relevant socioeconomic setting, a wide range such as “late Persian / early Hellenistic” does not represent a substantial problem.<sup>10</sup>

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9. See Yoder (2001), who dates MT Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31 to “a date between the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E. and the end of the third century B.C.E.—most likely sometime in the Persian period” (p. 38). Lang (2004b) suggests that the text may be “roughly contemporaneous with Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*” and in any case no earlier than the 5th or the 4th centuries B.C.E. (2004b: 188–89; 2004a: 140). Wolters (1985: 577–87) proposes a date in the 3rd century (but notice also Fox’s critique on purported crucial evidence for the dating [Fox 2009: 897]; and the comments in Yoder 2001: 33). Finally, one may notice that Waegeman suggests a date no later than the 2nd century B.C.E. (Waegeman 1992: 101). In general, positions concerning these more narrow temporal ranges tend to be argued on matters such as the connection between Prov 30:10–31 and Proverbs 1–9, observations about similar social (and clearly gendered) settings in the Persian period or in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* (see, e.g., 3.10–15; 6.9; 7.1–41; 8.11–17; 10.10–13), and some linguistic considerations (among other matters). For some additional considerations, see n. 21 below.

For the position that Prov 31:10–31 is a premonarchic text, see Lyons 1987: 237–45. Lyons contends that the basic “pioneer” conditions of the premonarchic period that she associates with this text were also present in the Persian period but decides to support a date in the premonarchic period because of her position that “the extended family did not reappear a self-sufficient economic unit” at any time in Judah, including the Persian period, after the beginning of the monarchy (Lyons 1987: 241). Neither the crucial position nor the related dating has received much support in current research.

10. What about proposals to date the text outside these general parameters? Not only is there is no evidence supporting a Hasmonean date for the text, but both Ben Sira’s reliance on Proverbs and commonly suggested dates for LXX Proverbs make such a date less likely. See Cook 1993: 25–39; 1999: 448–61; 2008: 67–85. A monarchic date for Prov 31:10–31 is also difficult, given, inter alia, the multiple interrelations between this text and other texts in the book. But, for the present purposes, even if one were to argue that there was some forerunner of Prov 31:10–31, the אשת־חיל evoked through acts of reading Proverbs (again notice, how the relevant text

The second preliminary observation is that, although (a) the wife in Prov 31:10–31 evoked images of Lady Wisdom (e.g., Prov 31:10; cf. 3:15, 8:11), and (b) was likely imagined as partially embodying some of the attributes of Lady Wisdom, and (c) at times an ad hoc potential (though limited) overlap between the two was connoted (e.g., Prov 31:25–26) for the sake of stressing how good she was, the fact remains that the אשת־חיל was still construed and remembered primarily as a wise wife, not an elevated, above-human wife. Unlike the אשת־חיל, Lady Wisdom is not actually and exclusively married to a particular man. Moreover, and most significant, no matter how much the husband of the אשת־חיל was honored among his peers, he certainly did not marry the “daughter of YHWH” who stood before creation (cf. Prov 8:22–36).<sup>11</sup> The אשת־חיל was, after all, an ideal but very human, wife, mother,<sup>12</sup> manager, and entrepreneur whose memory served as an exemplar for other (human) women—not a kind of goddess or just an allegory for Wisdom (McCreesh 1985: 25–46).<sup>13</sup>

Since the אשת־חיל was remembered as an ideal human wife, she could embody and communicate what the community—or better, what the well-off sector of the community—considered ideal economic be-

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is deeply and carefully interwoven with others) could not have preceded the book itself, which in any case leads us back to the Persian–early Hellenistic period.

11. Of course, when the text is read with very different “lenses,” other meanings appear, e.g., when the אשת־חיל is the Church and Christ is her husband (see Wright 2005: 186–87), or as a type of Mary (a quite common approach, even today in some religious circles), or the “torah” (see *Midrash Proverbs*—implicitly, YHWH is her husband), or “Practical Wisdom” or “matter” that serves “Philosophical Wisdom,” or “the intellect” (see Ralbag, Proverbs 31; ההומר המשרת אל השכל שרות שלם), or Israel (Pesiq. Rab. 31, and Zohar 3.42.b), or the Shekinah and Queen Sabbath (as often understood in traditional Jewish liturgy, influenced by Kabbalistic traditions), or any number of biblical women (e.g., Sarah—passim in rabbinic sources, the wife of Noah, Midrash Eshet Hayil at the beginning), or even, at times, men such as Moses, or the ideal student of Torah. According to Saadia Gaon, the text recounts “the attributes of [excellent] men” (though metaphorically), whereas according to Yefet ben ‘Eli, it recounts the attributes of excellent people, whether men or women. See Sasson 2013: 173–76. On rabbinic sources, see Valler 1995; and on general Jewish traditional understandings, see Fox 2009: 905–7; and bibliographical references cited in these two works. For a discussion of the place of the *Eshet Hayil* in contemporary Jewish, liberal and feminist liturgy, see Falk 1999: 451–52.

12. Certainly not to be identified with the only woman explicitly characterized as an אשת־חיל in the Hebrew Bible—namely, Ruth—when she was still destitute (Ruth 3:11). Compare and contrast with Goh 2014: 487–500.

13. For a different take on the relation between Lady Wisdom and the אשת־חיל along with a relevant exploration of the concept and role of “personification,” see Camp 1985: 96–97, 186–222. For a critique of McCreesh’s position and arguments, see Gilbert 1999: 147–67.

havior at the level of a single household. In fact, thinking about and through the אשת־חיל was a way for the community to explore and express its views about ideal economic activity at the level of a single affluent household. This level is particularly important, not only for all the usual reasons for taking into account the activities of agents other than central political leaders or whatever is said about them, but also because it is most likely that the individual household was and was considered by the community to be the basic social and economic unit.<sup>14</sup> In what follows, I will discuss some aspects of these concepts and their potential significance.

*Economic Power Brings Honor and the Strongest Endorsement  
for the Pursuit of Profit and for Profit Itself*

The אשת־חיל produced material gain (v. 11) for her husband and household. Not only is the wife’s strenuous pursuit of gains—that is, her pursuit of profit (and profit itself)—glorified within the world of thought evoked by the text, but her acquisition of wealth (i.e., economic capital) provides her and him with additional honor, social capital, and power rather than vice versa. This is a rhetorical and mnemonic (at least) partial reversal of the expected situation: namely, that power is the source of wealth, rather than vice versa. In fact, it is often maintained that, whereas wealth is the source of power in capitalistic societies, the opposite was true in more traditional societies (Amin 1991: 349–50). Given the relation between power and social capital, the transformation of her profits into her husband’s/household’s social capital/honor, the observation made above about wealth’s being a source of power holds true in the “story” of the אשת־חיל, even if one were to argue that the community did not construe this wife as one who pursued profit for profit’s sake and wealth for wealth’s sake.

The same holds true when attention is explicitly drawn to the patronage system headed by the אשת־חיל herself (not her husband) and certainly not restricted to “women and children,” but to the poor and needy in general (v. 20; see כִּפְּהָ פָּרְשָׁה לְעַנֵּי וְיָדֶיהָ שֶׁלְחָה לְאַבְיוֹן). Producing and accumulating economic power was conceptualized as leading to increased social capital and power, rather than vice versa, and these matters were explored and embodied in the אשת־חיל.

The reference to her husband and his increased honor (v. 23) may imply an additional redistribution/patronage system, this time managed by the elders of the city.

14. There is no house of the (local) king to compete for socioeconomic power in the Persian period, and it is unclear whether the Jerusalemite temple played a direct and central role in the *production* of wealth within the province.

These references are not insignificant. They serve an ideological need to “normalize” or “balance” her pursuit of profit and wealth (well beyond that required for covering sufficiently the needs of her household) by transforming them into a pursuit that serves purposes other than increasing wealth and by suggesting, implicitly, a potential redistributive system.

To them, one may add the likely later shift in the characterization of the אשת־חיל from a “wise” woman (see LXX Prov 31:30) to a woman who “fears YHWH” (MT), which in another way “normalizes” her memory.<sup>15</sup> But, to be sure, remembering the אשת־חיל meant assigning much more social mindshare to her work and its constant pursuit of accumulation of wealth within the boundaries of her household and to its partial, glorification, rather than to the social redistribution of the wealth accumulated through an ongoing, constant pursuit of profit, and nowhere is it stated that the main reason for all her labors was to fund the poor and needy.

A final observation: this reversal of expectations—namely, that wealth is construed as leading to power, rather than vice versa—may well be only partial. The אשת־חיל and her husband and those who identified themselves as the addressees of the opening rhetorical question were imagined as members of a high socioeconomic group that already owned considerable resources. One may argue, then, that the society in Yehud as a whole had a power structure that, although it was allowed material wealth to bring about relatively minor shifts of social clout/power among its top echelon, due to restricted social mobility reflected a system in which as a whole, power (i.e., the already existing power of the top echelon of household) led to its increased wealth rather than vice versa. This may well be correct, but one must keep in mind the case of Ta(pe)met and her daughter Yehoshima, which represents a very well attested instance of social mobility in Elephantine.<sup>16</sup> Such cases might have been uncommon and, in any event, one cannot extrapolate from Elephantine to Yehud. Nevertheless, they raise questions about any claims that social mobility fueled by acquisition of some relative measure of wealth was

15. An additional potential case of “normalization” that is clearly not a late addition may be discerned in v. 31, if one follows Fox and understands the texts as envisioning “two kinds of recognition: material and verbal” (Fox 2009: 899).

16. Compare with, for instance, the situation at the time of the mother’s wedding as reflected in B 36 = TAD B3.3 with that of the daughter in B 41 = TAD B3.8. (Social mobility through outstanding service to the crown, esp. but not exclusively in the military, had long been a common path to social mobility in the region and has been well attested in, for instance, Egypt. But we are referring here to a social mobility that is not dependent on the decision of important figures in the court.)

an impossibility in Yehud.<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting in this context that Prov 30:10–31 at the very least creates the illusion that any household led by such an אשת-חַיִל will do well (see pp. 38–39 below) and that remembering her was still remembering that an increase in profit through the judicious management of a wife was likely to lead to increased social power.

*Pursuing Profit Is Wise and It Involves Wisdom about How to  
Make a Profit: Articulating the Construction of an Economy*

How did the imagined, remembered, and, ideally, to be imitated as much as possible אשת-חַיִל pursue her profit and increase her wealth? The text suggests that this question is important. In fact, within the multiple sites of memory encoded in the authoritative repertoire of the community, thinking about and through the image of the אשת-חַיִל provided one of the few potential grounds for exploring these matters at the most-relevant level for the community—that is, the single household.

To be sure, the text refers to the proper administration of resources (esp., food and clothing, including the appropriate purchase and production of goods for household use, e.g., food, v. 15; and clothes for herself that communicated her high status, v. 22).<sup>18</sup> But in terms of creating a profit, the stress is first on the sale of value-added products. In particular, she produces clothes and sells (luxury?) linen garments and sashes (or loincloths) to merchants and with her earnings she buys good fields and plants vineyards (v. 16) that, in turn, are supposed to increase her profit. As profit and wealth accumulate, she is able to produce even more profit and wealth. Her position is secure, and she may “laugh” (v. 25) at the time to come (i.e., whatever the future may bring).

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17. It is worth stressing that there was (some degree of) social mobility in both Egypt and Mesopotamia, and not only at the top (e.g., “commoners” who became royal or high-level military or administrative leaders with “humble” origins). These matters are beyond the scope of this essay, but see, e.g., Steinkeller 1987: 73–115, e.g., p. 100; Stone 1999: 208; Frood 2010: 478–79; Vandorpe 2010: 159–79. For the present purposes, it suffices to note that assumptions about an airtight closure of the possibility of social mobility in Persian/early Hellenistic Yehud/Judah are problematic.

18. Imagining her making status clothes for herself makes sense within the world evoked by reading the text among the literati of the time but seems to have raised some uneasiness among some later readers. What about her husband? The LXX “normalizes” the text: “She duplicated cloaks for her husband and for herself clothes of fine linen and purple” (NETS). Another example of the LXX’s tendency to “normalize” the text appears in v. 21, which in the LXX reads, “Her husband has no concern for his household, when he spends time somewhere, for all that are hers are being clothed” (NETS). LXX Proverbs emerged in a society that was not identical to that of the original text and in which sensitivity to the partial “absence” of the husband likely led to additional, explicit textual “mitigation,” when compared with the MT.

The אשת-חיל was imagined as an entrepreneur, as an extremely industrious person who worked day and night (v. 18; compare and contrast with Josh 1:8). She was remembered as “seeking” דרשה wool and flax (v. 13; compare and contrast with Ezra 7:10), as a master of her trade (vv. 13, 19), a person well aware of quality control (v. 18), and a mistress who wisely and kindly taught her servant-girls to produce very good wares (v. 26; cf. 15). She was recalled as a wise trader, intelligent buyer of farmland,<sup>19</sup> and a planter and owner of vineyards. A set of concepts about ideal economic behavior was thus shaped, formulated, and expressed.

Of course, necessarily, the same holds true for a world of thought and attitudes concerning socioeconomic matters. Within this world, the image of a trade ship evoked strong positive responses, and trade in general not only was viewed in very positive terms but was construed as necessary for the wise management of well-off households. The sense of a Yehudite household’s ability to behave wisely in both the economic sphere and in (local and foreign) trade was construed and communicated.

Needless to say, this represents a very different view from the commonly attested ancient (essentially) moralistic, aristocratic disdain for trade and its corrupting influence, as well as for profit produced from trade—all of which were seen as potentially destabilizing forces from the perspective of an established, land-based aristocracy.<sup>20</sup> It is perhaps, not surprising that trade is viewed so highly in a text in which a *wife* is made the exemplar of productive, wealth-creating leadership.<sup>21</sup>

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19. Note the choice of words in v. 16—namely, שָׂדֵה וְתַקְוָהּ, “she plans (/schemes) and executes.” Whatever she carefully plans, she executes. These are not impulsive but well-calculated purchases, and within this world of memory and imagery, there is nothing the other side can do to stop her.

20. In terms of ancient Israel, see, for instance, the negative characterization of trade in the oracles against Tyre or other Phoenician cities (e.g., Isaiah 23; Ezekiel 27), but see also Nah 3:16 and see the negative reference to Babylon in Ezek 17:4, as a city of merchants. Note that there is no comparable negative, moralizing account of farming in any of the so-called oracles against the nations (OAN). On Ezekiel 27, see recently Wilson 2013: 249–62.

This tendency existed in many other ancient Mediterranean societies. See the polemic title in Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (2000); and cf. Bang 2006: 56–58.

It is worth noting that, in Babylonia, “There is no indication that enterprise was considered ‘dirty business’ or something to be delegated to an underling as in Roman times” (Wunsch 2005: 367–79).

21. There is an element of “transgression” on all these matters. Transgressions or challenges to socially accepted viewpoints are often (construed as) gendered.

Within the world evoked by the אשת־חיל, productive reinvestment was considered a strong virtue, but significantly and not surprisingly, within an agrarian society and economy, land holdings were brought to bear. Within the world of the אשת־חיל, wealthy, well-managed households were supposed to increase their land holdings through well-considered purchases. In this world, fields did not evoke images of ancestral inheritance (cf. 1 Kgs 21:3)<sup>22</sup> but of goods up for purchase by successful, wise household leaders, including wives such as the אשת־חיל.<sup>23</sup>

It should be noticed that, within the "story" of the אשת־חיל and the world it construes, there is nothing the seller can really do to stop her from buying the plot that she planned to purchase. She intelligently planned and industriously carried out her plan. A seller is obviously implied in this story and world, but not worthy of being explicitly mentioned or remembered, since he (or "she"?) had no significant role to play in the story, and his (or her?) perspective was deemed irrelevant.

#### *Wives as Economic Agents and an Economy Imagined as the Arena for Wives' Heroism*

Since one is to assume that men were also economic agents, and they also bought fields, the question of preference for the memory of a wife over a husband in the most memorable case of successful management of a household within the community cannot be avoided.

Certainly, the *Sitz im Buch* of Prov 31:10–31 played a role in such a preference (see the multiple links between Proverbs 1–9, 31:1–9, and 31:10–31),<sup>24</sup> and the same holds true for tendencies to recall and incorporate some of the attributes of Lady Wisdom in the אשת־חיל. Prov 31:10–31 was read and the אשת־חיל was imagined and remembered in ways informed by the book of Proverbs as a whole and, vice versa, the way the book was read was informed by the concluding and memorable figure of the אשת־חיל. Just as Lady Wisdom is a caring, reliable provider, so is the אשת־חיל. Within this basic plot, there is not much room for a male provider.

22. Note also Meyers's observation: "In contrast with the detailed Pentateuchal legal materials dealing with restitution of property, there are no laws that regulate land transfer except for inheritance" (Meyers 1997: 20). This absence served to construct an ideal world in which these transfers are not worth thinking about or remembering.

23. Contrast the trader with whom the אשת־חיל continuously collaborates and who is necessary for her creation of wealth. Traders and, for that matter, her "girls" (i.e., maidservants) are construed as being in a situation of ongoing interdependence with the אשת־חיל; sellers of fields are not.

24. For the former (i.e., between Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31) see, e.g., Yoder 2001; for the latter (i.e., between Prov 31:1–9 and 31:10–31) see, e.g., Hurowitz 2001.

The preference for a wife figure led (within the relevant cultural context) in turn to other preferences, such as an emphasis on clothing (and on the preparation of food and internal administration of the household) or that she be imagined as selling (luxury) clothes (Lang 2004b). Given this emphasis, it is only to be expected that there will be references to her “girls” (rather than her “boys”). Moreover, since within this conceptual world, the household served for production and reproduction, just as the Greek *oikos*, it is not only expected that the successful wife would be imagined as a mother. In addition, since the characterization of the אשת־חיל centers on her success and wisdom in managing the household and increasing its wealth, it is only to be expected that matters of sexual pleasure and desire or the woman’s physical looks were construed as irrelevant and thus not worthy of being mentioned.<sup>25</sup>

As usual in all these instances, it is what was not necessarily anticipated that deserves particular attention. In this case, it is the fact that the community was asked to imagine the אשת־חיל as a wife who used *her* profits to purchase fields wisely and plant vineyards. To be sure, unlike Athenian women, elite Persian women owned (and managed) land,<sup>26</sup> but the אשת־חיל was imagined within a community in which the ideal world expressed in its “legal” texts was very unclear about whether wives, under normal circumstances, could buy fields on their own and held them as their property,<sup>27</sup> and in which, within this ideal “legal world” (commercial), land transfers were not worthy of much thought (and attention), unless it was in the context of redemption (e.g., Leviticus 25; Westbrook 1991: 11; see also pp. 90–117).

But the text and the memory of the אשת־חיל that it shaped not only stressed the wife’s agency, inside and outside the physical boundaries of her “domestic” space, and into the “male” realm of farming, but also depicted her in terms associated with the masculine/warrior sphere. To some extent, remembering the אשת־חיל involved activating an underlying image of economic activity as war and her agency as heroic behavior. The use of terms such as אשת־חיל (connoting a pair with גבור חיל “mighty warrior” in v. 10), שלל (connoting “booty” in v. 11), the

25. This is true despite the fact that sexual desire (and to be more precise, the desire of a husband for his wife) was considered very important in other wisdom texts and within the very book of Proverbs (see Prov 5:15–19). Compare and contrast with the social constructions of similar matters in Greece. See, e.g., Corner 2011: 60–85.

26. As is widely known, Spartan women could own land. See, e.g., Hodkinson 2003.

27. See Westbrook (1991: 65) and note, “It is not certain that women could own property at all.” See also this: “[T]he limitation of women’s property rights is the economic linchpin of patriarchal structure. . . . The basic fact that women did not normally own land made them economically dependent on men—first on their fathers, then on their husbands, and ultimately on their sons” (Kensky 2008: 983).

language of v. 17 (namely, *חגרה בעוז מתניה ותאמץ זרעותיה* "she girds her loins and strengthen her arms")<sup>28</sup> all point in this direction. One may even say that there was a connoted, secondary military image when the community remembered that her husband "trusts in her"; for him and his household, she is their fortress and "army," upon whom they can reliably lean (cf., e.g., Wolters 1988; Lawrence 2009: 341–43).

The partial "masculinization" of the necessarily "feminine" image of the *אשת-חיל* involved multiple processes of "otherization" and "mirroring" and the creation of a conceptual shared "in-between" realm populated by those construed as agents in the production and accretion of wealth, including both wise males and females.<sup>29</sup>

A study on these matters cannot be carried out within the present essay, but for the present purposes the accompanying characterization of economic activities aimed at increasing wealth as the equivalent of war is of particular significance, and so is the attribution of heroic features to those succeeding in making a profit. It is worth noting that the social background of the text is a local elite who lives in a community without a local king or army and cannot aspire to heroism in battle, but only (as the text suggests) to increasing their wealth. Remembering the *אשת-חיל* works well in the community, because such action embodies in a female body a social mindscape concerning economy and wealth creation shared by the elite, including directly or indirectly (as members of a retainer group) the male literati who read and reread these texts and who may have read them to others, especially nonliterati members of the elite.

Obviously, the *אשת-חיל* is construed as an ancient super-wife and super-mom.<sup>30</sup> This being the case, and despite the many evident differences, contemporary critiques and cross-cultural, social anthropological comparisons between the *אשת-חיל* and today's image of the (North American) "super-mom" may be heuristically helpful for approaching some aspects of the social and ideological setting in which these "types" emerge and become popular. The ubiquity of the concept/image of the present-day "super-mom" is not dependent at all on whether actual North American mothers can fulfill the too-high expectations or on the systemic reorganization of resources that would be required to allow more than just a few to come close to fulfilling them, and certainly not on whether this image is an oppressive burden on some (elite?) women, because it creates expectations that cannot be matched in reality by most women (even elite women). Instead, its popularity is due to its ability to

28. On this expression, see Novick 2009.

29. Note also at the basic level of the implied "narrative," the explicitly necessary partnership of the *אשת-חיל* and male traders, who shared the same goal of acquiring wealth through their respective "trades."

30. The point is quite explicitly expressed in, for instance, v. 29; cf. v. 31.

embody a set of values and ideals about work, pursuit of profit, wealth, and “heroic” agency in the economic world that characterizes a substantial sector of today’s society and that, in turn, influences others. It stands to reason that the situation in the case of our ancient “super-wife/mom” was not substantially dissimilar. If this is true, the social mindset embodied in the אשת־חיל was not far from that of a significant sector of individuals in the Persian or early Hellenistic period in Judah who remembered her, as they read, reread, and imagined her.

*A Different Kind of Potential Cross-Cultural Observation  
about Wives with Some “Masculine” Features*

Yehud was a poor province, and even its elite were relatively poor. The same may be said of early Hellenistic Judah. These circumstances may have facilitated a tendency among the male literati who read these texts and shaped these worlds of imagination and memory to accept and even idealize a slightly “masculinized” feminine image. Cross-culturally societies that live in harsher environments are more predisposed to developing a male preference for women who show some “masculine” features, because the latter tend to be construed as communicating a better ability to compete for resources, which is exactly the area in which the אשת־חיל excels (Marcinkowska et al. 2014).

*Secure, Predictable Society and Principles of  
Selection Governing Memories*

The אשת־חיל is a site of memory that conjures an entire economic world of activity. The world evoked by the site presupposes a peaceful and stable society. The אשת־חיל could laugh at what the future might bring because, in her world, the future was predictable, controllable, and construed in continuity with the present. She did not need to worry about calamities, about invading armies that might destroy her household or pillage her wealth, or any other chaotic event (e.g., drought). In her world, her wise use of wealth has resulted in secure wealth for years to come.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, since chaos does not play any substantial role in this world, intelligence and industriousness lead necessarily to wealth, blessing, praise, and honor. What characterizes the אשת־חיל is that she is superintelligent and superindustrious (passim), so she surpasses others (v. 29); but all these wives share in the same secure, nonchaotic world.

One could mention also that the אשת־חיל is a super-reliable wife/entrepreneur/mom. Everything is in order in her household, and chaos has no leg to stand on. Her household and the world in which she lives

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31. Of course, it is the kind of security and peace that encourages investments in production, training of future workers, and allows for intelligent, long-term planning.

are *partially* construed as microcosms/macrocosms of each other. If this is true, who is the counterpart of the אִשְׁת־חַיִל in the larger world? One answer would be “Wisdom” (cf. Proverbs 1–9 and the ways in which it informs and is informed by Prov 31:10–31), but how is Wisdom manifested in the macro-world? Moreover, within the discourse of the period, would it not be possible to imagine YHWH as the wise leader of a household that contains the entire world and from which chaos is removed? What about the leadership of a temple with cosmic significance (Van Leeuwen 2007; Ben Zvi 2014)? Or the Persian king? Or multiple possible combinations of the above? Most significantly, this issue is not explored in Prov 31:10–31 (see below).

To be sure the secure, nonchaotic, reliable world mentioned above could only exist if there were social and political structures to maintain it. It required a sense of social cohesion but also actual political power and ability to control the area to eliminate any substantial chaotic event. In some ways, this orderly, permanently peaceful world was a local reflection of the nonchaotic, peaceful world of Achaemenid royal ideology in which the Persian king provided happiness to humankind (cf. Lincoln 2012). But remembering the אִשְׁת־חַיִל meant, not only viewing the world and economic activity in it from the perspective of a single household, but bracketing matters that were not and could not be controlled by such a household (e.g., taxes, Persian imperial rule, temple leadership, and even YHWH, who from the perspective of the community governed the world).<sup>32</sup> As mentioned above, it is likely that v. 30 did not include the reference to “fearing YHWH” (see the LXX), but even if it is not the case, YHWH is not explicitly portrayed as an active agent in the “story” of the אִשְׁת־חַיִל.

The principle of selection governing the memories to be evoked by the אִשְׁת־חַיִל and her activities was that, whatever helped to depict her agency was to be remembered, for the pericope was about her and what she did. But the presence of such a rhetorically and mnemonically helpful focus does not mean that the community remembering such a “great” world in which the אִשְׁת־חַיִל lived and which, to a substantial extent, seemed to “mirror” theirs was not being implicitly socialized into a world of Persian imperial rule, of temple leadership, of YHWH’s rule, or of taxes. “Natural” preconditions are most often not worth mentioning, but still images and “memories” of a world that implicitly assumes them socialize as much as or more than explicit references.<sup>33</sup>

32. As mentioned above, it is likely that v. 30 did not include the reference to “fearing YHWH” (see the LXX), but even if this is not the case, YHWH is not explicitly portrayed as an active agent in the “story” of the אִשְׁת־חַיִל.

33. This peaceful, nonchaotic world seems less likely to have been construed as “natural” when the weight of the chaos that followed the fall of the Achaemenid

### אשת-חיל, *Socialization, and Mutually Balancing Voices*

The preceding sections explored aspects of intellectual thought, world view, and a general social mindscape reflected and communicated by the “story” of the אשת-חיל and embodied in her. They have shown that remembering this wife involved socialization into a world of ideas concerning the role of elite wives and the economy in general. It involved inculcating certain approaches concerning profit, trade, industriousness, wealth, land-acquisition and ways to achieve honor in society. It involved also a partial appropriation of the concept of heroism that emphasized, inter alia, how difficult the ongoing pursuit of profit was. It involved a focus on households as the central socioeconomic unit and a general view of society that is devoid of substantial anxiety concerning the power of chaotic powers. Society was construed as stable, predictable, and ordered.

Remembering the אשת-חיל involved recalling and stressing the role of Wisdom. It also involved balancing other texts and messages that existed within the world of thought and knowledge of the remembering community. One may mention, for instance, how the very presence of a view from a “private” household, as opposed to the usual view from the perspective of political figures and centers (kings, governors, etc.) mutually balances, complements, and informs the community’s approach to many other texts.

The same can be said for remembering a female hero rather than a male hero, of remembering the less heroic husband (see below) and needless to say, of the mentioned viewpoints concerning economic activity, trade, pursuit of profit, goods, agents, which, from a perspective of the discourse of the community as a whole, mutually complement, inform and balance other views, widely expressed in other texts.

#### *Observations on the Utopian אשת-חיל and Her Orderly World as an Expression of Lacks and Longings*

The אשת-חיל and her world represented a utopia. Of course, it was the utopia of a particular group in society and others (e.g., her “girls” or those who sold their fields to her) may not have shared it. Still, it was a utopian world, and such worlds often provided societies ways

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Empire began to affect the social mindscape of the community in Yehud (which usually occurs one generation or two after the events). In my opinion, Prov 31:10–31 seems more at home in the 5th or 4th centuries B.C.E. than the 3rd century. This consideration for dating seems to me far more important than the lack of Greek elements. For proposed dates for this text, see n. 9 above.

to address present lacks and express their longings. Wives are not like the אשת-חיל though, significantly, the ancient male readers would have liked them to be. The latter is not an insignificant observation, given the expanded role that she exerted, the secondary role of the husband in the leadership of the household (note that nowhere is it stated that her husband "allowed" or "commanded" her to do her role; and see the different situation in *Oeconomicus*), and common transcultural attitudes such as those expressed in Sir 25:22 ("There is wrath and impudence and great disgrace when a woman supports her husband").

Similarly, households are not as prosperous as that of the אשת-חיל, and subsistence goods play a larger role in the economy. Even affluent families in an agrarian society located in a stable polity might suffer from lack of rain or pestilence. Farmers rarely "laugh" at what the future may bring, but they would like to.

Of course, the אשת-חיל served some of the transcultural social roles associated with a super-hero, and in this case and most significantly, a masculinized but saliently female super-hero. But who are her "enemies," the "super-villains" that she must confront. They are neither the "others" (whether construed as internal or external to her social group) nor natural forces (e.g., drought, pestilence, etc.), mythological animals, or even "the sword." The "villains" with whom this super-hero has to contend seem to be laziness, lack of understanding, or the proper socialization of those under her. Of course, none of these are substantial hindrances to a person with her wisdom. A super-hero with such enemies is on the one hand the kind of super-hero that emerges from the book of Proverbs as a whole, but on the other hand is a super-hero for a society that even affluent households could only dream of.<sup>34</sup>

*From a Utopian אשת-חיל and Her Orderly World to  
Socioeconomic Realities in Persian or Early Hellenistic Yehud*

The interwoven network of images mentioned in the preceding section along with their orderly, predictable, stable and wisdom-full world represent an example within a wide range of sets and arrays of sets of "ideal" images in ancient Israel (Ben Zvi 2006; 2013). All of them were characterized by the absence of some (substantial) "lack," which varied from set to set and array to array, and yet all of them emerged out of a utopianist generative grammar, whose particular manifestations (i.e., the mentioned sets and arrays of sets) informed and balanced each

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34. There is nothing to fear in this world and nothing standing against making a profit and the associated accumulation of wealth and honor, except rejection of the wisdom exemplified in the אשת-חיל.

other. Whereas a discussion of these matters goes beyond the scope of this essay, the same does not hold true for some observations on an additional (and complementary) facet of the study of utopian or imaginary worlds in ancient Israel that is particularly relevant to the contribution that the study of images and (utopian) memories evoked by the *אשת-חיל* makes to the elucidation of some of the matters to which this volume is devoted.

Utopias cannot but be based, to some extent, on existing worlds. There are constraints on social imagination and social communication that affect the production of utopias. The “story” of the *אשת-חיל* “worked” because the target readership was aware of what merchant ships, traders, luxury clothing, maidservants, fields, and vineyards were. All of them existed in the world of the text and in that of the remembering community.

Likewise, the literati in Yehud who were imagining and remembering the *אשת-חיל* could not have construed her and her world as ideal if they were not willing to accept, at least to some extent, the socio-economic values that implicitly governed and were reflected and communicated by the *אשת-חיל* in their own “historical” world—not just in the world evoked by remembering the *אשת-חיל*.

A society in which relatively affluent groups value industriousness and the ongoing pursuit of profit, and in which wealth is meant to lead to more wealth and to increased honor, in which trade is a positive feature and so is increased land acquisition—this society does not have to be a “pre-capitalist” society. Such societies most likely did not exist in antiquity. Instead, it was a society in which traditional agrarianism was combined with the existence of markets and one in which, despite “moralistic” claims by entrenched land aristocracies, wealth might indeed come from trading value-added products;<sup>35</sup> moreover, wealth

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35. Even a cursory debate on the place of markets in ancient agrarian societies is well beyond the scope of this essay. On these issues, see, e.g., Bang 2006: 51–88; 2011 and the debate it initiated. See also, e.g., Hunt 1991: 153–68, esp. §3.1.6.1 “Market Exchange,” pp. 158–61.

For the present purposes, it suffices to state that markets existed for millennia but that their existence did not turn the relevant economies into “market” or “capitalist” economies. Likewise, concepts that resemble present-day concepts in some form (e.g., loans, interest, shared investments, shared profits) existed in some ancient societies—the obvious case of Old Assyria comes to mind, and see, e.g., Veenhof (1997: 336–66), but this is just one example (for a study of another, see Wunsch 2010: 40–61). But none of this means any of the relevant societies were modern capitalist societies. At the same time, the existence of these ancient concepts that somehow resemble contemporary concepts should not be denied solely for fear of seemingly advancing an anachronistic, “modernistic” view.

from these sources might at times bring in new landowners or further elevate existing ones (see Prov 31:16, 28).

Likewise, although the references to the activities of the אשת-חיל are clearly hyperbolized for obvious literary and mnemonic reasons, it is safe to assume that they reflect in some way actual activities of wives within the relevant socioeconomic circle in Yehud. The fact that women in substantially different but more-or-less contemporary societies of the period fulfilled similar roles (see esp. Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, but also the evidence from Elephantine and other areas in the Persian period; e.g., Waegeman 1992; Lang 2004b; Yoder 2001: 59–72) not only reinforces this position but also demonstrates beyond doubt that these socioeconomic patterns were not exclusive of wealthy or “trade-oriented” (groups within) societies (e.g., Athens, Babylonia). The same point emerges from cross-cultural comparisons with societies that were by no means contemporary with the society in Yehud, as the case of households in the blurry boundary between urban and rural in the Ottoman period shows (Lang 2004a).<sup>36</sup>

Studies of socioeconomic realities in mid- to late Yehud (or its continuation in early Hellenistic Judah) have focused, with good reason, on the evidence from the archaeological data. But textual evidence may also contribute a great deal. Unlike other textual evidence often advanced that either focuses on putative, one-time events or scribal legislation,<sup>37</sup> Prov 31:10–31 sheds (indirectly but) very good light on ongoing economic activities and attitudes among affluent households. Moreover, unlike other textual sources, it sheds light not on the center (e.g., the impact on the economy of a governor or of the temple, as a central institution) but on the activities and dreams of multiple, though wealthy agents. In some ways, one can say that Prov 31:10–31 may be one of the very few sources that allows one to come a bit closer toward something even partially resembling what a limited microhistory of the

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36. Of course, the אשת-חיל lives and works in that blurry boundary between rural and urban as well.

37. Usually the main texts brought to bear are Ezra–Nehemiah, esp. Nehemiah 5 and, though less often, some pentateuchal literature. The first is substantially shaped by common historiographic tendencies/metanarratives (e.g., those involved in the quasi royalization of Nehemiah); the second deals with literary/ideological examples of legislation that were not necessarily drafted for the purpose of actual implementation. These considerations do not necessarily preclude their use as sources for reconstructing the economic history of Yehud but raise a number of issues that must be addressed—although, for obvious reasons, in a separate study.

Persian (and early Hellenistic) period in Judah might have looked like, had we sufficient resources to develop one.<sup>38</sup>

38. On microhistory, see, for instance, Szijártó 2002: 209–15; and the “classical” work in Levi 1992: 93–113. For an evaluation of the tendency toward microhistory among a substantial number of contemporary historians, see Marcos 2009: 80–93 (University of Barcelona), “Tendencias historiográficas actuales,” published online and available freely at Cultura Histórica, <http://www.culturahistorica.es>. As I mentioned elsewhere, the attention that characters such as Ta(pe)met or Mibtahiah of Elephantine have received suggests that, had significant, relevant sources been available, a substantial number of historians of ancient Israel would have developed at least some microhistorical practices when reconstructing the history of Persian period Judah/Yehud (see Ben Zvi forthcoming).

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