

Making Gender
in the Intersection
of the Human
and the Divine

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Edited by

Muhammad Shafiq
and Thomas Donlin-Smith

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Dedicated to the students, staff, faculty and volunteers of the Hickey
Center for Interfaith Studies & Dialogue at Nazareth College who work
tirelessly to promote interfaith dialogue across the globe

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PREFACE

Since the inception of the Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue in 1999, questions have been asked about whether or not interfaith is an academic discipline. If it is, would it be a part of religious or sociological studies or something else? What would its relation to other departments in the humanities and social sciences be? Since most private universities have interfaith chapels or spirituality centers, what would be interfaith studies' relationship to all these?

These and other questions are still open for discussion in the American Academy of Religions' (AAR) annual meetings and other academic circles. However today we face deep divisiveness in our country and it is growing everywhere in the world. This divisiveness is based on social issues of race, gender, color, and ethnicity and is religious also. Looking into the issues of our modern world in the 21st century, I came up with a new definition of interfaith studies: "Interfaith studies and dialogue is not just about faiths; it is about race, gender, culture, and all other aspects of human life. Deep down, interfaith dialogue is to look after and nourish the whole of human life; spiritual and physical as well." This is the next civil rights movement that many of us are talking about. Whatever interfaith studies' relationship would be with other academic disciplines, it is our academic responsibility to bridge the gap through interfaith dialogue.

From the very beginning of the Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue at Nazareth College, I used to say that the goal of the center is: "to take academia to the community, bring the community to academia, and to build a new relationship of understanding and serving humanity." I teach a course on Globalization, Inclusivity and Dialogue. This course is not taught inside the four walls of the classroom, but rather the students are taken to historical places of race, gender, ethnicity, and worship to observe, apprehend, and appreciate the natural beauty of diversity in our world and what makes a community. The students' comments by the end of the course are spectacular, describing this experiential learning as adding to their compassion and professional excellence in all fields of study.

Since its foundation at Nazareth College of Rochester, what is now the Hickey Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue has had three major goals: First, to reach out to the next generation of America, educate them in the diversity of world cultures and faiths and prepare future leaders with a

broader vision of understanding the world. To move towards its objectives, since 2004 the Hickey Center has held a week-long summer program for high school students of the Rochester area. The graduates of this program envisioned a daylong Global Citizenship Conference first held in 2011, and some 650 high school students from 23 different high schools participated in its eighth annual conference, titled “Love Not Hate,” on March 13, 2018. We believe that educating our next generation in globalization is safeguarding the future prosperity of America. We are hoping to expand the program to other cities of America.

Our second goal was to bring the community to academia and take academia to the community to build relationships of mutual cooperation in enhancing the public good. For this purpose, we sponsor community programs and offer workshops, certificate programs, seminars on contemporary issues, and festivals of sacred music to advance multicultural and religious education. The speakers and presenters in these programs are drawn from the ranks of religious leaders and academics to demonstrate that religion and academia are not in conflict but rather complimentary.

Our third goal is to make sure that the Hickey Center is recognized as an academic center at Nazareth College. We not only introduced an interdisciplinary minor in interfaith studies but we initiated a series of international symposiums, Sacred Texts and Human Contexts, to encourage research in the area of interfaith and produce academic literature to educate people on the necessity of interfaith studies in a global context. The series provides a source for new ideas and critical reflection upon old ideas in order for the interfaith movement to stimulate the intellectual life of a global society. We hope to continue these conferences with challenging themes facing our world to produce valuable literature in interfaith studies.

In fulfilling our third goal we came to realize a need that has been present with us from our birth at the beginning of the 21st century: the need to study the interfaith movement as it has blossomed in recent years. This study occurs when we gather experts from diverse disciplines together with professors of religion and theology and social sciences to discuss topics of importance to the interfaith movement. The purpose of this series of conferences is not only to bring together experts in interpreting the traditions of the world’s religions to examine common issues, but also to produce valuable literature in the area of interfaith studies.

We had our first conference on Sacred Texts and Human Contexts: Sacred Texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Dividing and Uniting Humanity in June 2013 at Nazareth College, with more than 250 religious studies professors and religious professionals participating and more than 70 academic papers presented. The selected papers from the Conference

were published in December 2014 in a book: *Sacred Texts & Human Contexts: A North American Response to A Common Word between Us and You*. Our second international symposium on Sacred Texts and Human Contexts: Wealth and Poverty in the Sacred Texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam was held at Fatih University, Istanbul, Turkey in June 2014 and gratefully, the selected papers were published as *Poverty & Wealth in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. The conference planning committee then decided to open these conferences to experts in all faiths and social sciences. Our third international symposium on Sacred Texts and Human Contexts was on Nature and the Environment in 2016, and selected papers were published as *Nature and the Environment in Contemporary Religious Contexts* in 2017. Our fourth conference was on Women and Gender in Religions and the selected papers are published here. Our next conference is on the important issue of “Religions and the (De)Legitimization of Violence” on July 29-31, 2018 at Nazareth College.

No institution can thrive without collegial and financial support. Many thanks are due to Nazareth College’s president, administration, faculty, and staff for their wholehearted support of the Hickey Center. The continued cooperation of the Department of Religious Studies and the commitment to interfaith dialogue of Professor of Religious Studies Thomas Donlin-Smith, an advisor to the Hickey Center, and of Professor of Religious Studies Susan Nowak, is blissful. We must thank Brian and Jean Hickey for their continued moral and financial support, and the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) at Herndon, VA, especially Ahmad Alwani and Iqbal Unus, for their moral and financial support to the Hickey Center.

This work would not have been possible without a team of committed religious leaders, professionals, and academics, all dedicated to a common cause of respectful tolerance and peaceful coexistence. The Hickey Center is fortunate to have a conference planning committee that works behind the scenes to make the impossible possible. We are grateful to members of the conference committee for their support, in particular Thomas Donlin-Smith, David Hill, Nancy M. Rourke, Mustafa Gokcek, David E. Bell, Etin Anwar, Richard Salter, and Matthew Temple. I must also thank the Department of Religious Studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges for their continued support of these conferences. Most importantly, I thank Anastasia Tahou, Administrative Assistant, Rachel Skinner, and other Hickey Center student workers who work tirelessly on different projects of the Center.

In addition to all those mentioned above I must mention my family. Their forbearance is amazing—especially that of my grandchildren who are so often disappointed that their grandpa is busy with college work at home

and can hardly spare enough time to play or read Qur'an with them. I am grateful to my family for acknowledging this important work of interfaith.

The Hickey Center is indebted to its founders and many community leaders and individuals who continue to give us hope for the future and support our mutual quest for respectful religious and cultural dialogue and peaceful coexistence. Thank you.

Muhammad Shafiq, PhD
Hickey Center for Interfaith Studies & Dialogue
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INTRODUCTION

MAKING GENDER IN THE INTERSECTION OF THE HUMAN AND THE DIVINE

THOMAS DONLIN-SMITH¹

“Making gender in the intersection of the human and the divine” is a complex and ongoing project within the world’s cultures and religious communities. Reassessing the nature and role of women and men in social, familial, and religious life has been a deliberate and ongoing concern (with much variation, to be sure) in religious communities around the world for several decades. Never completed, it is nevertheless currently in a moment of heightened concern and intentionality. The purpose of this volume is to provide examples of scholarly reflection on gender issues as experienced in several of the world’s religious communities in order to advance interfaith understanding, to reconsider together the patriarchal histories of these religions, and to re-imagine gender for a humane and inclusive future. The central questions posed are: how do our prominent religious traditions reflect and construct our conceptions and performance of sex and gender, and how might we re-imagine sex and gender for the future? The essays contained here provide glimpses into scholarly thought, and the practices of adherents, at the present moment in these evolving traditions.

¹ Dr. Thomas Donlin-Smith is a professor of religious studies at Nazareth College. He teaches courses in biomedical ethics, ethics of the professions, religion and politics, religion and science, comparative religious environmental ethics, Christian ethics, and religious studies theories and methods. Dr. Donlin-Smith’s research interests include theory and method in the study of religion, religious ethics, and the relationships among religion, science, and politics. He directs the Nazareth College interdisciplinary program in ethics and is an advisory board member of the Brian and Jean Hickey Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue. He has served on numerous institutional ethics committees, human subjects research committees, and institutional animal care and use committees. He received his BA from The Ohio State University, MDiv from Wesley Theological Seminary, and PhD from the University of Virginia.

The authors demonstrate both what's at stake in the interconnected issues as well as some of the approaches we might take to untangle them and move forward creatively.

This book is the fourth collection of essays produced by the Hickey Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue flowing from its Sacred Texts and Human Contexts conferences. An evolving and expanding community of interfaith scholars from around the world has gathered at these conferences to engage issues of common concern such as income inequality, the environmental crisis, and in the next iteration of the conference, religion and the (de)legitimation of violence. Honest conversations on these controversial topics are both challenging and exhilarating, and the shared experience can result in deep understanding and genuine friendship. The nuance and comradeship of the face-to-face exchanges that occur in a conference setting cannot be duplicated in this text, but we are happy to present the academic papers that inspired and grounded the conversations.

The book is organized into three conceptually distinct sections which—as is so often the case with conceptual distinctions—turn out to be less distinct in practice. The three sections explore issues of sex and gender within sacred texts; in the historical religious traditions; and in current thought and practice. Admittedly, some essays span these divisions and could have been placed elsewhere in the book, but our priority has been the inclusion of interesting and important essays rather than organizational tidiness.

The first part of the book, titled *Gender and Religious Texts*, offers close readings of sacred texts from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Essays by Amy J. Chase and John W. Fadden even examine the same text—the Proverbs 31 description of a “woman of worth”—but with different methods and to different purposes. Together they illustrate well the intellectual range and richness of scholarly engagement with a single sacred text! Another pair of authors (Jose-David Padilla and Nicole Correrri) analyzes the challenge of translating controversial ancient vocabulary for contemporary English speakers. The religious contexts (Christianity and Islam) are different but in both cases translation choices have powerful implications for the construction of masculinity and prescriptions for male sexual behavior. All seven essays in this section provide fine examples of the challenges and opportunities of hermeneutics as the authors lead us through processes of interrogating the texts and developing from them creative insights for our contemporary circumstances.

Part Two of the volume, *Gender and Religious Traditions*, casts a wider look at the religious traditions and their treatment of gender across history, beyond the historical periods reflected in their sacred texts. Sharmila Kasbekar identifies familiar issues for today's Buddhist women reflected in the stories of the earliest generations of women who overcame social resistance to find "liberation in renunciation." Two other essays, by Demetrios E. Tonias and Jonathan P. Yates, illustrate ways Christian theologians (e.g., John Chrysostom, Cyprian, and Augustine) interpreted stories of Sarah and Rahab from the Hebrew texts as positive role models for their own time and place. Michael D. Calabria tells a fascinating story of women as both calligraphers and patrons of the Qur'an, demonstrating ways Muslim women have been empowered transmitters of their tradition. Finally, Mary E. Hunt's essay provides a bridge to the concluding section of the book as she brings the story of gender issues within our dynamic religious traditions into the current era of feminist spirituality and action.

The final third of the book, *Gender and Religious Practices*, provides examples of contemporary praxis on gender issues within Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu contexts. A wide range of disciplines and applications are represented in these seven essays. For instance, Kate Mroz compares the experiences of Muslim and Catholic women engaging the institutional politics of their religious institutions. Nawaraj Chaulagain and Amy K. Milligan examine ways in which Hindu and Jewish women are employing rituals as "strategic interventions" and "protesting through embodiment." Other authors discuss inclusion of LGBTQ persons in Orthodox Judaism, issues in Islamic counseling, and the construction of gender in Islam. Seven essays can only hint at the vast kaleidoscope of contemporary gender praxis in the religious communities, but it's a suggestive sample.

The authors certainly do not speak with one voice. Beneath the surface of the essays (and sometimes rising to top) lurk some profound and recurring questions that divide the religious communities and the scholars who study them. Two examples are suggestive of the deeper themes an alert reader might notice. First, some contributors are clearly questioning the assumptions of the traditional gender dyad; others are not. Is masculine-feminine dualism the only sensible (and the divinely sanctioned) way to understand humans, or should the religious communities adopt more multifaceted and dynamic understandings of gender?

Second, some contributors to this book—or at least the religious traditions they discuss—promote a "complementarity" approach to understanding gender relations; others opt for a more radical reimagining. According to a simple version of the complementarity view, there are

fixed, essential, and divinely established differences between differently gendered persons and, although all humans are of equal existential value, these gender differences provide a legitimate basis for the assignment of substantially different social roles to women and men. Social norms enforce the role differentiation, but the roles are to be understood as complementary, beneficial to the whole, and of equal ultimate value. Many of the essays in this volume could be fruitfully examined as to whether the complementarity view is assumed or whether it is being questioned by a more fluid anthropology and liberative ethic.

As these two questions suggest, issues of sex and gender in the religious traditions are philosophically profound, historically complex, theologically fraught, and morally controversial. Conversation can be difficult when such deep divisions abound. But the alternatives to humane discussion are not promising. Despite—in fact, because of—our many differences on these difficult subjects, the conversation must continue.

PART I

GENDER AND RELIGIOUS TEXTS

CHAPTER ONE

LOCATING A WOMAN OF WORTH: AN EXAMINATION OF SPACE AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN PROVERBS 31

AMY J. CHASE¹

Abstract: “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman,” writes Simone de Beauvoir. And how does a woman learn who to be? Those venerating the Bible often turn for insight to Proverbs 31:10-31, the rare scripture passage containing a female subject. There they find an extensive description of praiseworthy qualities attached to a woman who excels in both domestic and commercial pursuits. Many find the Proverbs 31 woman inspiring, but she is not without detractors. Feminist biblical scholars have in recent decades examined how the text portrays women and constructs gender, noting such features as its prioritizing of male interests and an idealization so extreme as to be deemed “pathological.” What has not been examined, but which has bearing upon the question of the text’s construction of gender and identity, is how this poem invokes the spaces of home, fields, foreign lands, and city gates when describing what the community needs from its women. In this paper I draw upon space theorists Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, and others to explain how such spaces shape identity in response to communal anxieties regarding wealth retention and enhancement, social order, and preservation and

¹ Amy J. Chase is a PhD candidate at Drew University, in Madison, New Jersey. Her dissertation applies a socio-narratological interpretive lens to Proverbs 31 to understand how the text is processing communal anxieties and constructing identity within a post-exilic Yehudite setting. Additional research interests include psychological interpretation of biblical narratives, narrative criticism, feminist criticism, and Bakhtinian readings. Ms. Chase has presented papers at both regional and national meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and she has taught courses related to the Bible and biblical interpretation at Drew University and at Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey.

perpetuation of the post-exilic community.

“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman,” writes Simone de Beauvoir.² How does a woman learn who to be? Those venerating the Bible have turned for insight to Proverbs 31:10-31, the rare scripture passage containing a female subject, known by the Hebrew term, *esheth chayil*, or as variously translated: an excellent, virtuous, strong, mighty, capable, or worthy woman or wife.³ In this poem, readers find an extensive description of praiseworthy qualities attached to a woman who excels in both domestic and commercial pursuits.

Many find the Proverbs 31 woman inspiring, but she is not without detractors. Feminist and womanist biblical scholars have examined how the text portrays women and constructs gender,⁴ noting such features as its prioritizing of male interests⁵ and an idealization so extreme as to be deemed pathological.⁶ What has not been examined, but which has bearing upon the question of the text’s construction of gender and identity, is how this poem invokes spaces. As constructed and used by humans, spaces are crucial for identity formation, and Proverbs 31 presents household, fields and vineyards, foreign lands and city gates in ways that shape expectations of women and men and the community of which they are a part. In this paper, I draw upon space theorists Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey and others to explore how the spaces in Proverbs 31:10-31 are constructed and how these spaces in turn construct identity. In Proverbs 31, the use of spaces in constructing identities reveals communal anxieties regarding wealth retention and enhancement, social order, preservation and perpetuation of the nascent post-exilic Jewish community in Persian-era Yehud.

² Translated from Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, vol. 2 (Gallimard, 1949/1976), 13.

³ The polysemy of this phrase fits the poem’s ambiguous and varied depiction of the woman’s attributes.

⁴ Including Athalya Brenner, Claudia Camp, Cheryl Exum, Carole Fontaine, Esther Fuchs, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, Madipoane Masenya, Carol Meyers, and Christine Yoder.

⁵ e.g. Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 174.

⁶ Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, “Rethinking the ‘Virtuous’ Woman (Proverbs 31): A Mother in Need of Holiday,” in *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest*, ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan and Tina Phippen (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), 111.

Space Theory

In recent decades, studies on space and place⁷ have expanded from the traditional focus of geographers into social-scientific and humanities-related fields.⁸ What has been called the “spatial turn” includes a sensitivity to the role that spaces and their attendant associations play in forming identities and imposing ideologies upon social, economic, and political life. Biblical scholars have joined in this pursuit, applying space theory to biblical texts, recognizing in so doing that, as Jon Berquist notes, “The Hebrew Bible is obsessed with space.”⁹

In a seminal work on space theory, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre writes that pre-capitalist societies organized spaces in ways that fostered relations of biological reproduction and relations of labor production.¹⁰ These two priorities appear in Proverbs 31:10-31, which promotes the organization of society into married couples raising children, their households laboring to produce not only children but food, textiles, cultivated lands, and other unspecified “fruits.” Both Lefebvre and Massey call attention to the artificiality of boundaries between public and private and the true interconnection of public and private spaces.¹¹ This insight bears upon Proverbs 31 in that the text portrays female domestic activity impacting public spaces even as it employs subtle strategies to represent these public spaces as the recognized domain of males.

Massey, in her work, diversifies Lefebvre’s Marxist interest in the role of capital shaping space and place, noting that factors such as ethnicity and gender also affect experience of place.¹² Employing the term “power-geometry,” Massey observes how certain social groups possess more

⁷ Use of the terms “space” and “place” varies. For the purposes of this paper I treat them interchangeably.

⁸ Jon L. Berquist, “Introduction: Critical Spatiality and the Uses of Theory,” in *Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography, and Narrative*, eds. Jon L. Berquist and Claudia V. Camp (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 1-2.

⁹ Jon L. Berquist, “Critical Spatiality and the Construction of the Ancient World,” in *‘Imagining’ Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social and Historical Constructs in Honor of James W. Flanagan*, eds. David M. Gunn and Paula M. McNutt (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 25.

¹⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 32.

¹¹ See Lefebvre, 153, and Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 170.

¹² Doreen Massey, “Power Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place,” in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, eds. Jon Bird, et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 62.

power than others to move and to direct mobility within a given space.¹³ Attention to space can reveal such hierarchies of power, along with the commensurate ideologies and identities that constructed spaces in turn construct. As Tim Cresswell points out in his work, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, expressions of “know your place,” or “put him in his place” imply that spaces are not just physical locations; they are mental conceptions bound up with “a sense of the proper,”¹⁴ including who belongs where and who should behave how in any given place. Proverbs 31’s renderings of space establish norms of behavior, interaction, and position for women and men. These norms enable the community to articulate needs and desires through an identity-constructing depiction of women. An identity for men also develops to the extent that they are “othered” from women, that is, knowing themselves in relation to whom they are not. In addition, the community overall develops an identity of itself as independent, orderly, and secure.

Lefebvre writes that space needs to be understood as a triad, comprised of 1) “spaces of representation,” that is, the meanings that humans attach to a space, 2) “representations of space,” meaning spaces planned and projected by those with influence, and 3) “spatial practices,” that is, how people use or move within space in ways that may not be overtly acknowledged.¹⁵ Mental conceptions of space often differ from the reality of how a space is use.¹⁶ For example, a train station may be planned and conceived to facilitate travel, but in practice, it also may serve as shelter for the homeless.¹⁷ Reading Proverbs 31 in light of space theory allows us to ask such questions as, in what ways do the spaces of Proverbs 31 reflect the projected desires and values of the community, especially its leaders, who would have composed the text? Can we also find here glimpses of pragmatic uses of spaces that differ from the presented ideal? The distinctions between the way spaces are represented and the way they are

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Tim Cresswell, *In Place / Out of Place Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁵ Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Rutledge, 2006), 109-110. Merrifield and others writing on Lefebvre acknowledge that he explains his concepts incompletely and at times in contradictory fashion. Writes Merrifield, “Unfortunately—or fortunately—he sketches this out only in preliminary fashion; he leaves us to add our own flesh and to re-write it as part of our own chapter or research agenda,” (109).

¹⁶ Berquist, “Introduction,” 5.

¹⁷ Cresswell, 4.

used offer entry into understanding how spaces are social¹⁸ and subject to contestation,¹⁹ resulting in a multivocal rather than uniform understanding of community.

A Woman of Worth: Much Desired, Rarely Acquired

The opening line of the Proverbs 31:10-31 acrostic contains two spatially suggestive terms: “find” and “far above.”

A worthy woman, who can find? Far above precious stones is her price (v. 10).²⁰

Proverbs 31’s date of origin cannot be conclusively established, but most scholars associate it with the Persian era, a product of Jews²¹ living in the province of Yehud. ²² Historian Ehud Ben Zvi notes that gender constructions joined ethnic “othering” as a prominent means through which the group, also known as early Second Temple Israel, established boundaries of their identity.²³ Verse 10 illustrates such gendered identity construction. An *esheth chayil*, or “worthy woman,” is highly desired. Since the Hebrew word *ishah* can mean either “woman” or “wife,” from the start it is understood that a worthy woman will be a wife.²⁴ She will have, as the next verse indicates, a *ba’al*, husband (with attendant

¹⁸ Ibid., 86-88.

¹⁹ Lefebvre, 391.

²⁰ Translations are my own.

²¹ Most likely descendants of those exiled to Babylon following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586/587 BCE, later returned to their “homeland”—or those who identified with this community.

²² Ehud Ben Zvi, “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,” in *The Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context*, ed. Marvin Lloyd Miller, et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 29.

²³ Ehud Ben Zvi, “Othering, Selfing, ‘Boundarying’ and ‘Cross-Boundarying’ Interwoven with Socially Shared Memories: Some Observations,” in *Imagining the Other and Constructing Identity in the Early Second Temple Period*, eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 33.

²⁴ Cf. Wilda C. M. Gafney, “Who Can Find a Militant Feminist? A Marginal(ized) Reading of Proverbs 31:1-31,” *The AME Zion Quarterly Review* 112.2 (2000): 25-31.

meanings of “owner” or “lord”),²⁵ who does the desiring. This desired woman is difficult, if not impossible, to locate. Such is indicated in two ways: 1) by employing a rhetorical question, “who can find,” a phrase employed elsewhere in biblical texts to suggest that the answer is “not many” or “no one,”²⁶ and 2) through comparing this woman’s “price” to rare and precious stones. Opinions differ as to what this price (“*micrah*” in Hebrew) refers to—perhaps a dowry the wife brings into the marriage, or a payment the groom makes to a bride’s family.²⁷ In any case, the *micrah* is valued so highly as to be what few possess and, therefore, a rarity.

The worthy woman is desirable, married, rare to find. Men should want her, seek her, and expect to pay a price to obtain her. In such manner texts construct identities both of subjects within and readers without according to the means and degree that readers conceive and relate to the subjects in texts.²⁸ “It trusts in her, the heart of her lord, and plunder he will not lack” (v. 11).

This line expands the gendered distinctions of verse 10. Here the woman (wife) is valued for the value she brings her husband, and the man, her husband or lord, receives and benefits from the value she brings. Such observations about communal expectations of women and men may seem so obvious as to not deserve mention, but therein lies the power of identity construction. Projecting conditions as “natural” and universally assumed socializes hearers even more effectively than explicit teachings.²⁹ Writes Tim Cresswell, “A group cannot become dominant and rule effectively without claiming common sense as their own.”³⁰

²⁵ Ludwig Koehler, et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 142.

²⁶ Bruce V. Waltke, “The Role of the ‘Valiant Wife’ in the Marketplace,” *Crux* 35.3 (1999), 31. Also Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 891. A similar example would be Micah 7:18.

²⁷ See Fox, 891-892.

²⁸ Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-narratology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 50. See also Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 36.

²⁹ Ehud Ben Zvi, “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,” in *The Economy of Ancient Judah in Its Historical Context*, eds. Marvin Lloyd Miller, et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 39.

³⁰ Cresswell, 18.

Identities form in large part via how others perceive a person's qualities and capabilities.³¹ The perception may not be accurate but can nonetheless actively limit one's freedom and agency. This is so particularly when the perceptions of others produces an "infiltrated consciousness," a term that means when subjects themselves adopt a perception of themselves as inferior to others in some way.³² In Proverbs 31, even though the *esheth chayil* acts assertively in her daily affairs, a compromised female identity is shaped from the outset of this text through the normalization of male assessment of women, through also the normalization of males establishing standards according to which women are assessed, and through the substance of the standard itself: women valued according to how they benefit men. Moreover, the text actively cultivates a sense of inferiority by conveying that women who measure up to this male-produced, male-benefitting standard are rare indeed.

Communal Identity: Get Spoil or Be Spoiled

With regard to communal identity construction in Proverbs 31, the abundance of economic-themed words is telling.³³ The first two lines alone, cited above, mention *worth*, *precious stones*, *price*, and *plunder*. This last word translates from the Hebrew word, *shalal*, meaning "booty, spoil, goods that have been plundered."³⁴ Scholars take *shalal* as a metaphorical reference to the gains the husband of a worthy wife amasses from her toil.³⁵ The word has a communal nuance, because spoils of war only come through group effort at battle. Use of this term here, with its implications of communal effort reaping communal rewards, intimates the interdependence between the welfare of the larger community and that of individual men and women and their families. The battleground background of *shalal* could in addition trigger a collective memory of times of national threat and a corresponding conviction of what is at stake in choices that can affect the strength of the community, choices such as the selection of a wife. Repetition of similar military and economic terms throughout the

³¹ Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 81-82.

³² *Ibid.*, 28.

³³ Including such terms as *worth*, *price*, *gain*, *merchant*, *purchase*, *property*, *ships*, *selling*, *merchandise*, *tradesmen*, *gaining wealth*, *profit*, *the fruit of her hands*, and *works*.

³⁴ Ludwig Koehler, et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994-2000), 1532.

³⁵ e.g. Fox, 893.

poem evokes an understanding of this community as one perceiving itself to be under threat and promoting the idea that wealth retention and enhancement is one essential means of defense; ensuring that this community will be one to enjoy spoils rather than being spoils for someone else.³⁶

Communally Locating Power and Production

She is like ships of a merchant; from afar she brings her food. (v. 14)

And she rises while it is still night and gives prey to her household
and a portion to her maids. (v. 15)

She makes plans about a field; with the fruit of her hands she plants a
vineyard. (v. 16)

Several spaces are mentioned here: bringing food *from afar* (or *from other countries*),³⁷ giving prey to her *house*, planning a *field* and planting a *vineyard*. Thereafter follows mention of additional domestic activities, and then focus shifts in verse 23:

Known at the gates is her husband,
when taking his seat among the elders of the land. (v. 23)

These four verses associate male and female with differing spaces, the male situated in the elders' bench of the city gates and the female linked to travel routes, the home, fields, and vineyards. Massey writes that spaces are constituted via embedded practices,³⁸ meaning that the identity of a particular place forms via "the juxtaposition and co-presence there of particular sets of social interrelations, and by the effects which that juxtaposition and co-presence produce."³⁹ The elders' bench is where decision-making on communal issues occurs, as illustrated in Ruth 4, where Boaz negotiates a purchase of land and a marriage. The activity occurring in this spot thus makes it a place of influence and authority, and those acknowledged as occupying it—in this case, men—accrue to

³⁶ Reflecting this view, this phrase in a first century Aramaic *Targum* is translated: her husband "will not be plundered or lack." See John F. Healey, *The Targum of Proverbs, Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

³⁷ Waltke, 31.

³⁸ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005), 10.

³⁹ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 169.