

**NATURE AND GRACE IN THE INTERPRETATION OF PROVERBS
31:10-31**

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A point which has often arrested the attention of interpreters of the Song of the Valiant Woman, which concludes the book of Proverbs, is the relationship of the body of the poem, with its catalogue of the down-to-earth exploits of the lady portrayed, to verse 30b, which describes her as "the woman who fears Yahweh." The poem as a whole describes such mundane and this-worldly activities, and the theme of *yir'at YHWH* is so emphatically religious, that their juxtaposition within the same tightly-knit poetic structure has often evoked comment in the history of interpretation.

The poles of the relationship in question are readily identified, within the tradition of Christian theology, with the themes "nature" "grace." On the one hand we have the "natural" realm, the arena of ordinary and everyday earthly activities and concerns; on the other hand we have the "spiritual" realm, the domain of religion and worship is no secret that the relationship between nature and grace has historically been conceived in fundamentally different ways, and that the differing paradigms for construing that relationship correlate with profoundly divergent Christian attitudes to the perennial questions of Christ and culture, church and world, faith and reason.¹ It is perhaps legitimate to speak in this connection of different Christian *worldviews*.

It will be the purpose of this essay to show how different worldviews, understood in the sense of *traditional paradigms relating nature grace*, have influenced the history of the interpretation of Proverbs 31:10-31 from patristic times to the present. In this way I propose to illustrate the more general point, too often neglected in biblical studies, that one's basic stance on this fundamental religious issue is of decisive significance in the exegesis and interpretation of the scriptures. On that score there is no essential difference between early patristic and contemporary critical students of the Bible.

For present purposes I will distinguish four such worldviews, recog-

¹See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951) for typology of such attitudes.

nizing, of course, that other classifications are possible and legitimate as well.² Roughly speaking, and at the risk of falling prey to all the dangers of schematization, I propose to distinguish conceptions which look upon grace as *opposing*, as *completing*, as *flanking*, and as *restoring* nature.

In the first view, salvation is essentially incompatible with the ordinary world of created human life and provides a radical alternative to it. In the context of modern Western Christendom, we find this world view strongly represented in the Anabaptist tradition. The second one is that of classical Roman Catholicism, which speaks of a natural and a super-natural *ordo*, related in such a way that the latter "perfects" the former, and the former is oriented to the latter. The third view, often associated with Lutheranism, sees nature and grace (at least in the present dispensation) as two realms alongside each other with little intrinsic connection between them. The fourth world view, finally, resists every distinction of realms between nature and grace and insists that grace throughout means re-creation, an internal healing and renewal of perverted nature. In the modern West this view has been strong in the Calvinistic tradition.³

To make a play on Latin prepositions, we could say that these four paradigms construe *gratia* as *contra*, as *supra*, as *iuxta*, or as *intra naturam*. Each has been influential in the way in which the Song of Proverbs 31 has been interpreted.

It should be noted that in describing the four worldviews a variety of expressions is used to refer to their basic categories. On the one hand we speak of "nature," "the secular," "the natural," "the created world," and so on, and on the other of "grace," "the religious," "the spiritual," "supra-nature," etc. These cannot be said to be strictly synonymous, nor, indeed, equally legitimate, - but they are comparable as various designations of the basic terms of the classical "nature-grace" problem. That problem, dealing with the reality of both the sin-perverted created order and the salvation provided in Jesus Christ, is basic to all Christian thought, though its terms are construed in fundamentally different ways. It is this single trans-paradigmatic reality which makes the

²For example, Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, distinguishes five paradigms. See also the fivefold typology of my colleague James H. Olthuis, "Must the Church Become Secular?" in *Out Concern for the Church* (Toronto: Wedge, 1970), p. 120.

³My analysis owes a great deal to the work of the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921). See J. Veenhof "Nature and Grace in Bavinck," (tr. A. Wolters), academic paper distributed by the Institute for Christian Studies, 229 College Street, Toronto, ON Canada M5T 1R4. This is a translation of a section in J. Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie* (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1968).

divergent categories of the various worldview paradigms comparable in principle.

I. GRATIA CONTRA NATURAM

The first perspective looks upon "the fear of the Lord" mentioned in 1:30 as basically incompatible with such everyday earthly activities as spinning and weaving, planting and trading, as are listed in the body of the poem. The religious and the secular simply cannot be mixed in this way. Consequently, to retain the integrity of the Song, either the one pole of the relationship must be spiritualized, or the other one must be secularized.

The first alternative is that followed, with very few exceptions, in patristic and medieval exegesis. The domestic activities of the Valiant Woman are spiritualized by making her an allegory of some other, more clearly spiritual, reality. For roughly a thousand years there was a widespread consensus on this point. Whereas the Jews generally took the poem to refer to the Torah,⁴ Christians generally read it as a description of the church. To be sure, a few Christian exegetes proposed alternative allegories (the woman as wisdoms or scripture⁶ or the Virgin Mary⁷), but from Origen to the Reformation (and longer in Catholic circles) the allegorical interpretation held virtually undisputed sway. This was very largely due to the authority of Augustine, who devoted his *Sermo* 37 to the Song,⁸ and of his followers Gregory the Great⁹ and the Venerable Bede,¹⁰ reinforced in the thirteenth century

⁴Alexander Altman, "Allegorical Interpretation," s.v. "Bible," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 4: "Rabbinic aggadah and Midrash employed the allegorical method in an uninhibited homiletic rather than in a systematic manner. ...The only exceptions are the allegorical interpretations of Proverbs 31:1a-31 (the 'woman of valor' being understood as the Torah) and of the Song of Songs" (cols. 895-96).

⁵E.g., Adam of Perseigne (twelfth century), *Mariale*, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 211, col. 734

⁶So Nicholas of Lyra under the influence of Rashi (see note 13).

⁷E.g., Julien de Vezelay (twelfth century); see his *Sermons*, *Sources Chretiennes* 192-193 (Paris: Editions du Ced, 1972), vol. I, p. 90.

⁸Augustinus, *Sermones de Vetere Testamento*, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, vol. 41 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1961), pp. 446-73.

⁹Gregory has no commentary on Proverbs, but the allegorical interpretation of the song of Proverbs 31 is found scattered throughout his writings; see for example his *Registrum Epistolarum* 5. 12 and *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam Prophetam* 2. 18.

¹⁰Beda Venerabilis, *Super parabolas Salomonis allegorica expositio* in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 91, cols. 937-1040; cf., 1039-52. Beda's commentary on the Song is also printed under the name of Hrabanus Maurus in Migne, PL 111, cols. 780-93.

by a separate book-length commentary on the Song from the hand of Albertus Magnus.¹¹

Two points should be noted about this allegorical consensus. First a new spiritual meaning is given only to the "natural" activities of the Valiant Woman (for example the treatment of flax in verse 13 refers to the mortification of the flesh, the planting of a Vineyard in verse 16 symbolizes church-planting on the mission field, and so on¹²), but no new sense is required for verse 30 since this already has a spiritual significance.

Second, we must not suppose that this allegorical interpretation was taken to be merely one of the traditional four senses of this scriptural passage, existing alongside an equally legitimate literal interpretation. The remarkable thing is that even those medieval exegetes who stressed the literal sense (such as Rashi, Albertus Magnus, and Nicholas of Lyra) nevertheless interpreted the Valiant Woman as Scripture or the church. As Nicholas of Lyra explains and approves, they held that the figurative meaning here constitutes the literal sense:

In the last part of this book is placed the praise of the valiant woman. It is commonly interpreted by our teachers to refer to the church which is metaphorically called the valiant woman, and her husband Christ, whereas her sons and daughters are called the Christian people of both sexes, the way it says in Judges 9: The trees went to the bramble bush, etc. The literal sense does not refer to the physical trees, but to Abimelech and the Shechemites who anointed him king over them.¹³

Like the parable of the trees told by Jotham, the literal meaning of the

¹¹*Liber de Muliere Forti*, in *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia*, ed. A. Borgnet, vol. 18 (Paris: Vives, 1893), pp. 1-242.

¹²See J. Obersteiner, "Die Erklärung von Proverbia 31, 10-31, durch Beda den Ehrwürdigen und Bruno von Asti," *Theologisch-Praktische Quartalschrift* 102 (1954):1-12.

¹³*Biblia latina cum postillis Nicolai de Lyra* (1481), on Provo 31:10: "In ultima parte huius libri ponitur commendatio fortis mulieris. Et exponitur communiter a doctoribus nostris de ecclesia, quae metaphorice dicitur fortis mulier, et sponsus eius Christus; filii autem et filiae populus Christianus in utroque sexu. Et dicunt quod iste est sensus litteralis, sicut Iudicum IX dicitur: Ierunt ligna ad rhamnum, etc. Sensus litteralis non est de lingis materialibus, sed de Abimelech, et Sichimitis eum super se regem inungentibus." See also the influential *Postilla super totam Bibliam* of the thirteenth-century Hugo of St. Cher (printed in Basel, 1504) on Prov. 31:10: "A valiant woman, who will find, etc. Although this could be expounded literally [*ad litteram*] in some way, according to the text in Ecclesiastes 7 [vs. 28]: 'one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found;' yet, since the commentators make no mention of a literal exposition (and we have no wish to assume the office of prophet [*vaticinari*] at this point), we shall proceed with a mystical [i.e., allegorical] interpretation."

Song of Proverbs 31, in this view, is clearly allegorical.

If an exegete shrinks back from spiritualizing the secular activities of the Valiant Woman, and yet sees them as essentially incongruous as works of "the woman who fears the Lord," he has the other option of reversing the process, that is, of "secularizing" the sacred, in order to bring it into line with the "worldly" tenor of the poem as a whole.

Generally speaking, this is the approach taken by modern critical scholars. Adducing the Septuagint translation of verse 30 in support of their view, they argue that the original redaction of the Song spoke not of a "woman who fears the Lord," but simply of an "intelligent woman." Originally, in other words, the poem was "a secular song,"¹⁴ but the emendation of a "pious scribe" made it acceptable as part of the sacred writings.

To my knowledge, this hypothesis of a scribal *pia fraus* was first put forward by C. H. Toy in 1902,¹⁵ and it has been widely accepted since.¹⁶ It is reflected also in a number of recent versions of the Bible, notably the first edition of the Jerusalem Bible;⁷ which translates not the Masoretic Hebrew text, but the postulated *Vorlage*.

Again, there are two observations that are in order here. First, it will not do to claim that the scholars who advocate this text-critical reconstruction are themselves committed to a *gratia contra naturam* perspective. They may very well be agnostic on the issue. Instead they *impute* such a perspective to ancient Israel, or at least to the redactors of the text. Such an imputation, in turn, may well be influenced by experience of the traditional worldview here under consideration.

Second, it should be noted that the use to which the Septuagint is put in this case is quite dubious. A number of scholars have pointed out that the Septuagint can plausibly be taken to reflect the Masoretic text at

¹⁴Curt Kuhl, *Die Entstehung des Alten Testaments*, 2d ed. (BemIMunich: Franke, 1960), p. 270, on Proverbs: "A secular song (31,10-31) forms the conclusion of the whole. ..." (Kuhl's emphasis).

¹⁵Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner, 1902 [c. 1899]), pp. 548-50.

¹⁶Cf. W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Book of Proverbs* (London: Methuen, 1929), p. 287; B. Gemser, *Sprüche Salomos*, Handbuch zum Alten Testament (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1937), p. 84; M. B. Crook, "The Marriageable Maiden of Provo 31:10--31," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 13 (1954):137; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 186; H. P. Ruger, "Zum Text von Prv. 31,30," *Die Welt des Orients* 5 (1969):96-99; R. N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 186.

¹⁷The Masoretic reading is restored in the second (French) edition: *La Bible de Jerusalem* (Paris: Editions du CerE, 1980). The English version follows the first edition.

this point.¹⁸ Moreover, quite apart from this, it is questionable whether a different Hebrew *Vorlage* for the Septuagint should necessarily be taken as evidence of a more authentic text.¹⁹ Decisions on such questions are notoriously subjective and not immune from the influence of (imputed) worldview. ,

We see, then, how strong has been the influence of the paradigm which sees grace and nature as essentially in conflict with one another. With respect to the interpretation of the Song of Proverbs 31, both the consensus of the patristic and medieval church, and that of a good deal of modern critical scholarship, seem to have been decisively affected by this dualistic worldview.

II. GRATIA SUPRA NATURAM

In the second world view, "nature" is no longer an exclusively negative category. Though still depreciated with respect to *Hsupra-nature*," it is now given a legitimate, if subordinate, place. Its legitimacy derives from its being a preliminary to the spiritual, which therefore constitutes its fulfillment or culmination. This is the paradigm of the *duplex ordo* of official Roman Catholic teaching.

Antoine Augustin Calmet, a Benedictine exegete of the eighteenth century, gives clear expression to this perspective when he writes in his commentary on verse 30:

To this point Solomon had *hardly praised anything in his mother* but virtues which, though rare, *did not transcend the natural order*. He established, as virtually exclusive evidence of her praiseworthy qualities, the diligence, alertness, discipline, and efficient administration of the famous lady; here, however, he teaches that all these qualities, indeed even her very beauty and her charms, are worthless and of no avail unless the fear of God, piety and true Wisdom *are added to them* (my emphases).²⁰

¹⁸E.g., J. Becker, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), p. 212; J. Haspecker, *Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), p. 93, n. 15.

¹⁹See Ernst Wirthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 64.

²⁰Augustinus Calmet, *Commentarius Literalis in Omnes Libras Veteris Testamenti*, Latinis literis traditus a Joanne Dominico Mansi (WlfCeburgi: Riennner, 1792), vol. 6, p. 759: "Hactenus Salomon vix aliud in matre sua laudaverat quam virtutes, raras illas quidem, sed quae naturalem ordinem non superarent. Argumentum laudum suarum ferme unicum constituit industriam, vigilantiam, disciplinam, oeconomiam illustris foeminae: roc autem docet hasce omnes laudes, quin et pulchritudinem ipsam et lepores, nisi Dei timor, pietas, et vera Sapientia accedant, inanes esse et nihil. ..."

Particularly telling here is the idea that the fear of the Lord must "be added" (*accedere*) in order to give value to the *naturalis ordo*. The spiritual is a kind of adjunct which elevates the status of the natural.

In the twentieth century this perspective comes through clearly in a popular book written by Michael von Faulhaber, a German cardinal trained in Old Testament studies. Commenting on Proverbs 31:30, he writes: article

The pearl of women has not forgotten the one thing needful amid all the Martha-cares of her busy life, but by her fear of God she has set the crown on all her life's work.²¹

Here the "fear of God" and "her life's work," correlated with "the one thing needful" and "Martha-cares" (an allusion to the story in Luke 10:38-42), are clearly distinguished, and the former is conceived as crown in relation to the latter, a fitting image of the hierarchical subordination of the natural order.

Because this world view makes such a clear distinction between the natural and the spiritual, it also lends itself to a combination with the critical view of the text mentioned under Section I above. We find such a combination, for example, in the article on Proverbs in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* by W. G. Heidt:

Apart from 31:30b, which could possibly be a later scribal modification, the virtues attributed to the ideal wife are wholly in the natural order: she seemingly has no other purpose than laboring for husband and household. However, these passages may be a final example of how secular compositions were taken over by the wisdom editors and spiritualized by being immersed in the wisdom context, which oriented all human endeavor toward God. Verse 30b, then, would be an authentic expression of the sacred author's mind and purpose.²²

It is especially expressions like "the natural order," "secular compositions," "spiritualized," and "sacred author," which reveal the structure of a nature/supra-nature framework, here ingeniously interwoven with a conjecture of redaction criticism. The "scribal modification," in this view, does not *bring about* the spiritualization (as in Paradigm 1) but *expresses* a spiritualization which has already taken place by being "immersed in the wisdom context." The insertion of the poem into the spiritual order, therefore, is here more gradual and does not involve outright falsification. Grace is the *culmination* of nature.

²¹Michael von Faulhaber, *The Women of the Bible* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1938), p. 23.

²²*New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), vol. 11, p. 916.

III. GRATIA IUXTA NATURAM

Whereas the first paradigm has been most influential in the history of interpreting the Song of the Valiant Woman, and the second has had the greatest institutional authority, the third has perhaps had the smallest impact, at least in published commentaries. Moreover, it is closely akin to the second worldview in that it gives a separate and legitimate province to both the natural and the spiritual and could therefore (for some purposes) be classed with it.

I devote a distinct section to it here for two reasons: because as a worldview it does have a distinctive structure which marks it off from the classical Roman Catholic view (notably the absence of hierarchical subordination), and because Luther has supplied us with a particularly striking quote which gives apt expression to this kind of two-realm conception.

It must be remembered that it was probably Luther, or else (under his influence) Melancthon,²³ who first broke the spell of the allegorical interpretation of the Song of the Valiant Woman. This must undoubtedly be understood in the context of the overall revalidation of natural life in the Reformation and particularly of Luther's doctrine of *Beruf* or vocation. This is clearly evident in Melancthon's commentaries on the Song.²⁴

Luther did, however, maintain a clear duality between a natural realm and a spiritual realm. This comes out plainly in a note which he jotted down in the margin of his translation of Proverbs 31:30:

That is to say, a woman can live with a man honourably and piously and can with a good conscience be a housewife, but she must also in addition and next to this, fear God, have faith and pray.²⁵

²³See his *Nova Scholia in Proverbia Salomonis* (1529), reprinted in *Melancthon's Werke in Auswahl*, vol. 4 (Giitersloh: Mohn, 1963), ed. P. F. Barton, p. 463, as well as his *Explicatio Proverbiorum Salomonis* (1555), found in *Philippi Melancthon's Opera quae Supersunt Omnia* ed. C. G. Bretschneider, vol. 14 (Halle: Schwetschke, 1847), col. 86 ("But this whole passage must be understood simply, without allegory, as the mirror of an honorable lady.")

²⁴The *Nova Scholia* (1529) twice speak of woman's *vocatio* in commenting on the Song and the later *Explicatio* (1555) similarly states that in it Uthe chief virtues and duties of her calling are listed" (col. 86).

²⁵*Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Die Deutsche Bibel, Band 10 (Weimer: Böhlau, 1957), p. 103: "Das ist, Eine fraw kan bey einem Manne ehrlich und göttlich wonen, und mit gutem gewissen Hausfraw sein, Sol aber dariiber und daneben Gott fürchten, glauben und beten." This handwritten note was first printed in the second 1543 edition of Luther's Bible translation. For its earlier history, see *op. cit.*, Band 4, pp. xxxiii and 29.

The Song's reference to the fear of the Lord, in other words, reminds us that while it is perfectly legitimate to be engaged in the worldly realm, there is another realm as well, distinct from the former and next to it (*darneben*) where the fear of the Lord, faith, and prayer have their place. Nature is not subordinate to grace, but neither does it have any intrinsic connection with it.

The same perspective is reflected in Melanchthon's *Explicatio Proverbiorum Salomonis* of 1555 in which the Song is analyzed in terms of two kinds of virtues: those' summarized in verse 30 (related to the first table of the Decalogue) and those listed in the body of the poem (related to the second table). The two kinds, once distinguished, are simply listed in juxtaposition to each other.

The third part [of the chapter] is a song about the virtues of an honorable mother of a household. Now as for all people the Decalogue must be the rule of life, so let the virtues in this panegyric be referred severally to the Decalogue. And the saying in this passage: ('The woman who fears God shall be praised,' belongs to the first table.

By *fear*, however, we must understand all true worship, the true acknowledgement of God, fear, faith, prayer, love of God, and other associated virtues. ...

Next are listed the remaining virtues: chastity in marriage, love for her husband without crankiness, diligence in all the tasks about the house, thriftiness, frugality. ...²⁶

In Melanchthon's view the virtues enjoined by the first table of the Decalogue seem to be relatively detachable from those commanded in The second table.

IV GRATIA INTRA NATURAM

The fourth worldview is distinct from the first three in that it rejects any division of nature and grace into separate realms. In this view the spiritual penetrates into the natural, transforming it from within. Because of this, it has a more positive view of nature (the good creation) than any of the others since grace is here seen to serve its restoration.

²⁶Opera, ed. Bretschneider, vol. 14, cols. 85--86: NTertia pars carmen est de virtutibus honestae Matrisfamilias. Ut autem singulis hominibus vitae regula esse debet Decalogus, ita in hac laudatione distribuuntur virtutes in Decalogum, et ad primam tabulam pertinet dictum hoc loco, Mulier timens Deum, laudabitur.

autem intelligatur torus verus cultus, vera Dei agnitio, Timor, Fides, Invocatio, dilectio Dei, et aliae coniunctae virtutes. ...

Deinde recitantur caeterae virtutes. Castitas coniugalitatis, amor erga maritum sine morositate sedulitas in omnibus laboribus oeconomicis, Parsimonia, Frugalitas. ...”

Applied to the Song of Proverbs 31, this paradigm fosters an interpretation which looks upon the fear of the Lord as integral to the poem as a whole. Religion is not restricted to verse 30, but pervades the whole.

Historically, this interpretation has often been associated with interpreters of the Calvinist tradition. A good example is the note on the Song which is given by J. F. Ostervald, a Swiss Reformed theologian of the eighteenth century:

It must not be supposed that what is said in this chapter relates only to the maxims and duties of running a household. It is religion which enjoins on women these very duties, and the qualities which Solomon praises in the persons of this sex are those which recommend them in God's eyes.²⁷

In other words, the good management of a household is itself a religious duty by which women please God.

The same point is made by Abraham Kuyper, the leader of Dutch Neocalvinism, in his discussion of the Song:

In the beautiful song in which Lemuel drew for his son the picture of the virtuous woman, there is almost no mention of the quiet, inner virtues of this woman. To be sure, it does say that she "feareth the Lord," but this too is understood of the outside, not the inside. A woman who demonstrates in her *home management* that she does not pursue vanity but fears the Lord, she shall be *praised*.²⁸

Here the woman's household activities are seen, not as something opposed to, or even distinct from, her fear of the Lord, but rather as its *external manifestation*.

The exegetes of this tradition are quite conscious of bringing a distinct perspective to bear on the interpretation of the Song, especially as regards the value and status of "natural" life. The English Puritan Thomas Cartwright, for example, in his influential seventeenth-century commentary on the book of Proverbs, after pointing out that the

²⁷See *La Sainte Bible . . . avec Les I. Thuveaux Argumens et les Nouvelles R-flexions* . par J. F. Ostervald (Amsterdam: F. Bernard et Herman, 1724). p. 543: "Il ne faut pas croire que ce qui est dit dans ce Chapitre, ne soient que des maximes et des devoirs d'Oeconomie. La Religion impose aux femmes ces m~mes devoirs; et les qualitez que Salomon loue dans les personnes de ce Sexe, sont celles qui les rendent recommandables devant Dieu."

²⁸A. Kuyper, *Als gi] in uw huis zit* (Amsterdam: Hoeveker en Wormser, 1899), p. 66: "In den schoonen zang toch, waarin Lemuel voor zijn zoon het beeld der deugdelijke huisvrouw uitteekende, staat over de stille zielsdeugden van deze vrouw bijna niets. Er staat wel 'dat ze den Heere vreest,' maar ook dit wordt niet van den binnenkant, maar van den buitenkant genomen. Fen vrouw die in *haar huishouding* toont, niet de ijdelheid na te jagen, maar den Heere te vreezen, zal *geprezen* worden"

Valiant Woman is pictured at 31:19 as personally engaged in the lowly task of spinning, adds the comment:

This passage must be given careful attention in order to establish us more firmly in the common duties of this life as duties pleasing to God, against the Anabaptists, who judge them to be too lowly to be engaged in by Christians, and against the Papists, who, although they do not condemn this kind of work, nevertheless, in that they exalt so highly the works of their own devising belonging to their innovations, which have never been approved by the Holy Spirit, slacken the hands of godly women.²⁹

The polemic against the Anabaptists and the Roman Catholics is here directed at their depreciation of the *communio huius vitae officia*, that is, the everyday tasks of natural life, such as the humble work of spinning thread. Cartwright clearly distinguishes the radical perspective of the Anabaptists (Paradigm 1) from the more moderate one of the Roman Catholics (Paradigm 2). He does not mention the third worldview, probably because in the Reformation Lutherans and Calvinists made common cause against what they perceived as the downgrading of the intrinsic creational goodness of natural life on the part of Anabaptist and Catholic writers.

It would be a great mistake, however, to suppose that the type of worldview reflected in the interpretation of the Song of the Valiant Woman is simply a reflex of an exegete's ecclesiastical affiliation. To be sure, this does largely seem to be the case in the time of the Reformation and the three centuries which followed it, but there is no such neat correlation between worldview and confessional tradition in the last hundred years or so. Increasingly, traditional paradigms relating nature and grace are transdenominational, no doubt under the influence of the rise of critical scholarship and the ecumenical movement. This is not to say, however, that the basic worldview paradigms no longer play a decisive role; instead they show up in less predictable contexts.

Linked to this weakening in the correlation of worldview and ecclesial communion is another trend that can be observed in the last century of interpretation of Proverbs 31:10-31. Although, as we have

²⁹Thomas Cartwright, *Commentarii succincti et dilucidi in Proverbia Salomonis* (Amsterdam: Laurentius, 1638), col. 1318: "Hic locus observandus est ad nos in communibus huius vitae officiis, tanquam Deo gratis confirmandum, contra Anabaptistas, qui abjcesse statuunt, quam ut christiani se in his exerceant, et Pontificios, qui, tametsi opera non damnent, dum tamen commentitia suarum novarum opera nusa Spiritu Sancto probata tantopere efferunt, manus piarum foeminarum refaciunt."

seen, Paradigms 1 and 2 are still very much alive in scholarly interpretation, and though Paradigm 3 is probably still operative in many devotional commentaries, there does seem to be a movement away from these on the part of the majority of biblical scholars.

This is evidenced by a kind of ecumenical convergence toward Paradigm 4 in modern interpretations of Proverbs 31:10-31. This growing consensus finds expression in two interrelated themes which have been repeatedly emphasized by exegetes of the Song since the late nineteenth century. The first theme is that all the Valiant Woman's actions are rooted in (or even constitute) her fear of the Lord; the second is that she represents the concrete embodiment of that wisdom whose beginning is the fear of the Lord.

As an example of the first theme we can quote Franz Delitzsch, the great Lutheran exegete of the nineteenth century. In his commentary on the Song he writes:

the poet. ...refers back all these virtues and accomplishments of hers to the fear of God as to their root.³⁰

This is an emphasis which we find repeated in such Old Testament scholars as Hermann Schultz,³¹ A. B. Ehrlich,³² B. Gemser,³³ W. H. Gispen,³⁴ and M. A. Klopfenstein,³⁵ as well as in devotional commentaries.³⁶

³⁰Franz Delitzsch, *Das Salomonische Spruchbuch* (Leipzig: Oorffling und Franke, 1873), p. 527: "der Dichter führt alle diese ihre Tugenden und Leistungen auf die Gottesfurcht als ihre Wurzel zurück."

³¹Hermann Schultz, *Alttestamentliche Theologie, Die Offenbarungsreligion auf ihrer vorchristlichen Entwicklungsstufe*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1889), p. 196: "Prov. 31:10-31 shows us the exemplary housewife, and looks upon such a faithful fulfillment of duty as *fear of the Lord* (30)." This statement is made under the general heading "The root of all morality is *fear of the Lord*." ; ..

³²Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel*, fünfter Band (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1912), p. 179: "Our heroine's fear of the Lord consists chiefly in the fact that she frees her husband from all the cares of life."

³³B. Gemser, *De Spreuken van Saloma*, tekst en uitleg, 2 vols. (Groningen/Den Haag: Wolters, 1929-31), vol. 2, p. 50: ". . .he looks upon the fear of the Lord as the foundation and summary of all virtues" (on 31:30). --'

³⁴W. H. Gispen, *De Spreuken van Saloma*, Korte Verklaring, 2 vols. (Kampen: Kok, 1952-54), vol. 2, p. 350: "Also the pluckiness [*flinkheid*] celebrated in this poem is rooted in the fear of the Lord" (on 31:30).

³⁵M. A. Klopfenstein, *Die Lüge nach dem Alten Testament* (Zurich: Gorthel£ 1964), p.174: ". . .not her charm and beauty, but her fear of the Lord, from which all the acclaimed virtues must spring as from their root, if they are to be true virtues" (on Provo 31:30).

³⁶See the *Stuttgarter Jubiläumsbibel* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1953) on Prov. 31:30: "Such a woman, whose domestic excellence and virtue is rooted in the fear of the Lord. ..."

The second theme is that of the Valiant Woman as the personification of Wisdom—not in an allegorical sense, but in the sense of an earthly embodiment of what it means to be wise. We find this interpretation expressed, for example, in the commentary of G. Currie Martin, who writes that the Song was probably added to Proverbs because “it embodied some of the ideals of practical wisdom that had been already inculcated.”³⁷ This theme is echoed in a number of subsequent commentators of various confessional allegiances. These include A. MacLaren,³⁸ A. Barucq,³⁹ B. Lang,⁴⁰ P. E. Bonnard,⁴¹ and H. Schüngel-Straumann.⁴²

The two themes we have discussed come together in a summary statement by Helmer Ringgren in his commentary on the Song. Having pointed out how highly the poet prizes the value of a good housewife, he writes:

This comports well with the general theme of Proverbs, for wisdom .in the broad sense of the word is precisely all that enables a person to succeed in life. The excellent housewife, too, stands as an example of such wisdom. And just as wisdom and fear of the Lord were one in the eyes of the collectors of Proverbs, so also the virtues of the good housewife have their roots in her fear of the Lord.⁴³

In this view, the “fear of the Lord” of verse 30 is both the root of the Valiant Woman's actions and the “beginning” of the wisdom which

³⁷G. Currie Martin, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, The New Century Bible (New York/Edinburgh: H. Frowde, 1908), p. 12.

³⁸Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, vol. 3: *II Kings-Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1942), p. 294.

³⁹Andre Barucq, “Proverbes, Livre des,” in *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplement*, Tome huitieme (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1972), cols. 1466 and 1468.

⁴⁰Bernard Lang, *Anweisungen gegen die Torheit, Sprichwörter-Jesus Sirach* (Stuttgart: KBW Verlag, 1973), pp. 52-53.

⁴¹P. E. Bonnard, “De la Sagesse personnifiée dans l'Ancien Testament à la Sagesse en personne dans le Nouveau,” in M. Gilbert, ed., *La Sagesse de l'Ancien Testament* (Louvain: Duculot, 1979), pp. 127-128.

⁴²Helen Schüngel-Straumann, “Die wahle Frau,” in *Christ in der Gegenwart* 33 (1981):385.

⁴³Helmer Ringgren, *Sprüche*, Das Alte Testament Deutsch, 16/1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1962), p. U1: “Das passt gut zum allgemeinen Thema der Sprüche, denn Weisheit im weiteren Sinne des Wortes ist eben alles was den Menschen zum Erfolg im Leben befähigt. Als ein Beispiel solcher Weisheit steht auch die tüchtige Hausfrau da. Und ebenso wie Weisheit und Gottesfurcht den Sammlern der Sprüche eins sind, so haben auch die Tugenden der guten Hausfrau ihre Wurzeln in ihrer Gottesfurcht.”

they exemplify. In other words, her praiseworthy deeds in home and community *flow from* her religious confession and allow no opposition or dichotomy between the secular and the sacred, between nature and grace.⁴⁴

I conclude by observing that the main thesis, the influence of worldview on (the history of) exegesis, can be effectively illustrated in the case of Proverbs 31:10-31. I do not claim that worldview is decisive in questions of interpretation, nor that other factors do not a crucial role. But at least in the selected test case--and elsewhere--the dimension of worldview, understood in sense defined in this essay, is shown to be a significant determinative factor in biblical interpretation. This is of interest not only to the historian of exegesis, but also to the practicing exegete who accepts the Bible's claims to authority. For my thesis leads to the conclusion that biblical interpretation can only be properly done if it is informed by a worldview which is itself biblical, and so provides a legitimate two-way link between biblical studies and systematic theology.

⁴⁴Cf. also Barucq, *or. cit.*, col. 1467: "The vignette which h.e en~aves.at the b~ttom of the page is intended as an idealized projection of the blossoming [*épanouissement*] into the everyday of a life grounded in a Yahwist wisdom." If we delete the words "a life grounded in," this formulation is freed from all suspicion of a lingering nature-grace duality.

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