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WOMEN'S WORK, HOUSEHOLD AND PROPERTY IN TWO MEDITERRANEAN SOCIETIES: A COMPARATIVE ESSAY ON PROVERBS xxxi 10-31

by
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The poetic portrait of the 'capable wife',[1] placed at the end of the biblical book of Proverbs, represents one of the most striking documents on women dating from Hebrew antiquity. Due to its brevity and the lack of similar biblical texts, scholars have made little use of the poem for understanding the organisation and management of the household in biblical times. It has also escaped the attention of economic historians. The present essay argues that new light can be shed on the poem and its socio-economic background from comparative evidence. Much can be learned about the Hebrew wife when her position is compared to that of the Athenian wife as depicted in Xenophon's Oeconomicus.

The Sources

Commentators are uncertain how to date our first source, the biblical poem on the 'capable wife'. Expert opinions differ widely, with suggestions ranging from pre-monarchical times (i.e., before the tenth century B.C.E.) to the Hellenistic second century B.C.E.[2] Within that range, the present writer prefers a 'late' dating. Apparently, chapter xxxi 10-31 does not form an original part of the book of Proverbs, a work assumed to date from the time of the monarchy (eighth century B.C.E.?). The poem may represent an appendix, added to the older work not before the fifth or fourth century B.C.E. We may think of it as a text roughly contemporaneous with Xenophon's Oeconomicus, a text to be considered below. In recent exegetical writing, two interpretations of the 'capable wife' vie with each other – the symbolic and the realistic. According to the first view, the poem must be studied in the light of Proverbs i-ix and this text's unique symbolic

[1] Prov. xxxi 10, New Revised Standard Version.

[2] See the works listed in C. R. Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31 (BZAW 304, Berlin, 2001), p. 18. On linguistic grounds, Yoder favours a date between the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E. and the end of the third century B.C.E. (p. 38).

universe. This context suggests seeing the woman as a symbolic figure, as Lady Wisdom, a cleverly constructed literary icon. [3] An abstract concept – that of human wisdom – is illustrated with the picture of a unique female person, a "super-woman" characterized by partly extraordinary and partly realistic features reminiscent perhaps of royal women of the Persian Empire. The second view – the one shared by the present writer and supported here with fresh evidence – interprets the poem in the context of the more mundane concerns of sapiential instruction given in Proverbs x 1-xxxi 9, which was intended to enable young people to cope better with life. Placed within this pragmatic context, the poem emerges as celebrating a person bursting with energy, a competent and successful woman of Israel's social elite, recommended as a model to emulate. She must be considered a real woman endowed with credible characteristics. Every item on the list of her capabilities is realistic, though we have to grant the poet the licence of making the list a little too long to be entirely true to life, of depicting in perfection what exists only in imperfection.

Our second source is Xenophon's Oeconomicus.[4] The Greek author Xenophon of Athens (ca. 430-356 B.C.E.), known for his war-memoirs (Anabasis), his book on the education of a leader (Cyropaedia), and his collection of Socrates anecdotes (Memorabilia), also wrote a dialogue on agriculture and the proper management of an oikos, i.e. the household or, more properly, the landed estate. The Oeconomicus is styled as a dialogue with Socrates as the main speaker. But since, as is well known, the philosopher as a somehow failed artisan cannot speak about the management of landed property with much authority, Socrates reports on conversations he had on the subject with Ischomachus, the wealthy owner of a well-managed estate. Ischomachus explains to him how he organized his household and how he instructed his (unnamed) wife in her duties. Xenophon's Oeconomicus ranks as one of the foremost primary sources on the social, economic, and intellectual history of classical Greece. Although

[3] Recent authors favouring this interpretation include Th. P. McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31", RB 92 (1985), pp. 25-46; N. Gutstein, "Proverbs 31:10-31: The Woman of Valor as Allegory", Jewish Biblical Quarterly 27 (1999), pp. 36-39; A. Wolters, The Song of the Valiant Woman: Studies in the Interpretation of Proverbs 31:10-31 (Carlisle, 2001), p. 153; Yoder, Wisdom as a Woman of Substance.
[4] Xenophon, Oeconomicus. A Social and Historical Commentary, with a New Translation by S. B. Pomeroy (Oxford, 1994).

originally meant as a guide to the style and ethos of aristocratic life,[5] and not as an actual manual on rural economy and know-how, modern historians appreciate and exploit this rich information about the complementary qualities of men and women, the functioning of the domestic economy under ideal circumstances, and details of agricultural practice. To my knowledge, Xenophon's description of the wife's domestic duties and her contribution to the management of the estate have never been considered as an ancient source that might help us understand the only biblical text dealing with the same subject – the book of Proverbs' poem on the 'capable wife'.[6]

Our analysis of what these sources tell us about the life of women in Hebrew and Athenian society considers three characteristic subjects: women's work, the separate spheres of wife and husband, and the wife's access to property. We will see that in the two Mediterranean societies considered here, women share more or less the same workload. By contrast, the social and economic context in which women perform their tasks is marked by specific national customs and legal traditions that determine their status within the household and in wider society; therefore our analysis will reveal not one shared female status but a variety of characteristically different positions. Despite their responsibility for more or less the same work, the Athenian women enjoyed very different social positions within the household and, by extension, within the wider society. We will begin by discussing 'women's work'.

Women's Work: Food and Clothing

By women's work, anthropologists understand the sum of the actual duties and responsibilities generally allocated to women in a given society. In our sources, two female activities are given pride of place – activities relating to two eminently basic but also very perishable goods: food and clothing.

Work connected with food figures as prominently in Xenophon as it does in

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[5] S. Johnstone, "Virtuous Toil, Vicious Work: Xenophon on Aristocratic Style", Classical Philology 89 (1994), pp. 219-40, esp. p. 229.

[6] In the extensive literature on Proverbs xxxi, I could trace only two brief references to Xenophon's Oeconomicus: M. Waegeman, "The Perfect Wife of Proverbia 31:10-31", in: Goldene Äpfel in silbernen Schalen, ed. K.-D. Schunck and M. Augustin (Frankfurt, 1992), pp. 101-107; J.P.Brown, Israel and Hellas (BZAW 231; Berlin, 1995), p. 237.

the book of Proverbs. “You must receive what is brought inside [i.e., all food] and dispense as much as should be spent. And you must plan ahead and guard what must remain in reserve, so that the provisions stored up for a year are not spent in a month. ... And you must be concerned that the dry grain is in good condition for eating” (Oeconomicus vii 36): this is one of the central duties the Athenian Ischomachus explains to his wife. She must receive food into the storerooms and make sure that the storage conditions are adequate, and that food is used in a responsible way. The actual preparation of food for eating (cooking and the rest of the kitchen work) is also mentioned. Amongst others, her tasks were “to supervise the baker, and to stand next to the housekeeper while she is measuring out provisions, and also to go around inspecting whether everything is where it ought to be. ... I [Ischomachus] said that mixing flour and kneading dough were excellent exercise” (Oeconomicus x 10-11). The wife spends much time in the kitchen supervising her slaves, though Ischomachus recommends her participation in the cooking, if only as an opportunity for taking healthy physical exercise.

In the book of Proverbs the following passage refers to food:

> She [the wife] is like the ships of the merchant,
> she brings her food from afar.
> She rises while it is yet night
> and provides food for her household
> and tasks [portions?] for her maidens. (Prov. xxxi 14-15)

Despite some semantic uncertainties, it makes sense to follow the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version: one of the first things to do each morning is the bringing of food from the store-room, and next comes the assigning of household tasks to the female slaves. The rest of the passage is less clear in its precise meaning. “She brings her food from afar”: from how far? According to Van Leeuwen[7] the implied reference may be to wheat – this cereal, not easily grown in the Judean hills, is imported from elsewhere, arguably from the plain of Jezreel, ancient Israel’s breadbasket. The ‘ship’ metaphor, however, may suggest another interpretation, implying fish imported from Egypt, Pelusium, or even

[7] R. C. Van Leeuwen, “The Book of Proverbs”, in: The New Interpreter’s Bible, ed. by L. E. Keck et al. (Nashville, Tenn., 1997), vol. 5, pp. 17-264, on p. 261. Van Leeuwen points out that the possibility of snow, within a Palestinian setting, makes only sense if we locate the estate in the Judean hills (Prov. xxxi 21; p. 262).

Spain.[8]

Archaeological research on ancient Greek households provides ample evidence for domestic weaving. The violent destruction of the Greek city of Olynthus by Philip of Macedon in 348 B.C.E. not only left grindstones and kitchen utensils, but also loom weights on the floors of the abandoned houses. Weaving equipment was found in most Olynthian houses, and in many of them, loom weights came to light in nearly every room.[9] While archaeology cannot tell us who did the weaving, ancient texts are unambiguous in their message – textile production was women's work. Ischomachus reports that when he married a fifteen-year-old girl, the production of clothing was the only skill she was trained in – "she came to me knowing only how to take wool and produce a cloak, and had seen how spinning tasks are allocated to slaves" (Oeconomicus vii 6). While this may not be much and is taken for granted, it is nevertheless essential and remains so in the newly established household. When "wool is brought in", she must "see that clothes are produced for those who need them" (Oeconomicus vii 36). In addition to supervising domestic textile manufacture, she is also encouraged to participate; in the words of Ischomachus: "And, Socrates, I advised her not to spend time sitting around like a slave, but, with the help of the gods, to try to stand before the loom as a mistress of a household should, and furthermore to teach anything that she knew better than anyone else" (Oeconomicus x 10), especially spinning to untrained slave girls (Oeconomicus vii 41). Whatever has to do with textiles – including "shaking and folding clothes and linens" (Oeconomicus x 11) – belongs in the realm of the housewife.

According to Sarah Pomeroy, textiles in antiquity functioned as women's "liquid wealth, for they could be readily converted to cash"; in classical Greece – and no doubt throughout the Mediterranean world – "women of all classes could weave and earn cash by this activity if necessary."[10] Interestingly, in the Oeconomicus, Xenophon does not refer to the women's selling of textiles, but he has a reference to it elsewhere – in an anecdote

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[8] S. Applebaum, "Economic Life in Palestine", in: The Jewish People in the First Century, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern (Assen, 1976), vol. 2, pp. 631-700, on p. 670.

[9] N. Cahill, Household and City Organization at Olynthus (New Haven, 2002), pp. 67, 169, 171.

[10] S. Pomeroy in Xenophon, Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary, with a New Translation by Sarah B. Pomeroy (Oxford, 1994), pp. 62 and 63-64.

about Socrates the economic adviser (Xenophon, Memorabilia ii 7.2-12). At least according to the official Athenian ideology, money-making activities such as selling textile goods or offering a variety of services – from washing clothes to nursing babies to selling bread or vegetables – were socially degrading and not appropriate for the wife of a respectable free citizen; yet we know that everyday reality is not always commensurate with ideals, and working women are not lacking in ancient records.[11] Their activities had to be authorized by the husbands, but clearly, Ischomachus would never have allowed, let alone required, his wife to engage in any degrading work outside the household.

In the book of Proverbs, textile production receives short, but vivid description:

> She seeks wool and flax,
> and works with willing hands. (Prov. xxxi 13)
> She puts her hands to the doubling spindle,[12]
> and her hands hold the spindle. (Prov. xxxi 19)
> She is not afraid of snow for her household,
> for all her household are clothed in scarlet.
> She makes herself coverings;
> her clothing is fine linen and purple. (Prov. xxxi 21-22)

All of this needs little comment. Women did not buy cloth and then cut and sew to produce a piece of clothing; instead, they start with spinning and weaving, and the appropriate skills are known as women's wisdom.[13] The production of winter clothing receives special attention, and anthropologists tell us of its importance. "Every inhabitant of the Mediterranean needs warm winter clothing", assert Horden and Purcell; "extremely few wear silk. Between the 'cobbling together' by the poorest agriculturalist of a makeshift winter-garment, or the widespread distribution of the cheapest second-hand clothing, and the sale of elaborately woven and embroidered damasks of the finest wool, there is a whole spectrum of demand."[14]

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[11] R. Brock, "The Labour of Women in Classical Athens", Classical Quarterly 44 (1994), pp. 336-46.
[12] For the "doubling spindle", see Wolters, The Song of the Valiant Woman, pp. 42-56.
[13] "Who has given to women skill (sophia, 'wisdom') in weaving, or knowledge of embroidery?" asks God in the book of Job, and the implied answer is: God did it when he created the world (Job xxxviii 36 in the Septuagint).
[14] P. Horden – N. Purcell, The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History (Oxford, 2000), p. 357.

Clearly, the Hebrew household considered here belongs to the elite that would produce and use only the best quality. The poet's reference to both the practical – winter clothing, and the beautiful – the use of scarlet and purple for dying cloth, is remarkable; aesthetic attractiveness matches functional perfection. We must assume that everyone, including the slaves, gets warm winter clothing, though the fine coverings and scarlet-dyed products were no doubt only for husband, wife and, possibly, the children. Mothers may have made a new garment every year for each member of the household, as did Samuel's mother for her son.[15] (1 Sam. ii 19). Interestingly, fifth-century B.C.E. Jewish documents illustrate the kinds of garments made by the Hebrew wife. Mibtahiah's marriage contract lists, among other possessions she brings to her new home, "one new garment of wool, striped with dye doubly-well, in length 8 cubits by 5 (in width), worth in silver two karsh shekels by the stoneweights of the king".[16] The marriage contract of Jehoishma, another Jewish woman, lists eight garments, also complete with indication of value; one item reads: "one new garment of wool, 6 cubits by 4, striped with dye, doubly-well, for one handbreadth on each edge, worth in silver one karsh".[17] These fine garments are wrap-around dresses – simple rectangular bands of cloth, edged with red or blue, to be wound around the body and over the shoulder, to fall in elegant tiers. Both Mibtahiah and Jehoishma belong to the upper class, just like the 'capable wife' of the book of Proverbs.

Commenting on the lines: "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and kind teaching is on her tongue" (Prov. xxxi 26), Margaret Crook[18] has ventured the interpretation that the Hebrew wife is skilled in instructing her maidens in the technical arts, i.e. in spinning, weaving and sewing. If this is accepted, we would have another parallel to the Oeconomicus. In biblical Hebrew, words denoting wisdom and intelligence occasionally refer to practical skills and technical knowledge such as those needed by a craftsman (Exod. xxxi 3-4; xxxvi 1; 1 Kgs. vii 14); this applies in our poem.

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[15] Samuel's mother made him every year a "fine robe" (1 Sam. ii 19), i.e. a robe of fine, thin, delicate (and no doubt expensive) fabric, and not a "little robe" as is generally translated; see H. Tawil, "Two Biblical and Akkadian Comparative Lexical Notes", JSS 47 (2002), pp. 209-14.

[16] Elephantine Papyrus B 28 (449 B.C.E.), in: B. Porten et al., The Elephantine Papyri in English (Leiden, 1996), p. 179.

[17] Elephantine Papyrus B 41 (420 B.C.E.), in: Porten et al., The Elephantine Papyri in English, p. 228.

[18] M. B. Crook, "The Marriageable Maiden of Prov. 31:10-31", JNES 13 (1954), pp. 137-40, see p. 139.

The Hebrew wife produces textiles not only for domestic use, but also for the market. “She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers girdles to the merchant” (Prov. xxxi 24). “She perceives that her merchandise is profitable” (Prov. xxxi 18a). Later, the Jewish midrash echoes a similar perception – a woman may become wealthy through her spinning (Midrash Bereshit rabbah lvi 11). The production of textiles at least in part presupposes the availability of cash, although the exchange of goods may also be implied. Whereas wool most likely came from the sheep that belong to the estate, flax was presumably – though not necessarily – imported from Egypt. According to a credible scenario, she would have bought flax and, after having produced garments and girdles, sold these for a good profit, most likely to itinerant merchants. The book of Tobit presents a similar scenario, though one set in more humble circumstances: Hannah, wife of a blind husband, makes money by weaving. Apparently, she gets wool from an employer, works at the loom in her home, and from time to time delivers the cloth for cash payment. We may think of Hannah’s employer as an elite household, for no other could give her a goat’s kid as a gift in addition to her wages (Tobit ii 11,12). Much in the spirit of the book of Tobit’s interest in business relationships we may venture the idea that only someone regularly delivering good quality –someone who has become an esteemed friend – would receive such a generous present.

In the two societies considered here, slave women relieved the upper-class wife from the dull and never-ending household chores, and the sources are quite explicit about this convenient delegation. According to Xenophon’s Oeconomicus, Ischomachus’s wife has a number of slaves at her disposal. The Athenian wife’s duties have to do with keeping order, planning and overseeing – in modern parlance: with the management – and only marginally with actually participating in the work of slaves. Participation, in fact, is not necessary for economic reasons but rather recommended as healthy physical exercise. Moreover, Xenophon distinguishes quite clearly between ponos and ergon, toil and work; the former defines the honourable occupations of the members of the upper class, the latter refers to the unpleasant jobs left to the slaves.[19] Slaves also belong to the Hebrew household celebrated by the poem, and the Mishnah declares that a wife who has one servant need not grind flour or bake or wash; if she has four

[19] Johnston, “Virtuous Toil, Vicious Work: Xenophon on Aristocratic Style”.

servants, she is free from all women's work, so that she may spend all day sitting in a comfortable chair – most likely giving instructions to others (Mishnah, tractate Ketubot 5:5).

The separate spheres of wife and husband

As in most traditional societies, those of the Mediterranean lands make a distinction between 'men's work' and 'women's work'. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Engels imagined this distinction to be a primeval one, belonging to the earliest social organization of human civilization, and there is no reason to think otherwise. His description merits quotation:

> Division of labour was a pure and simple outgrowth of nature; it existed only between the sexes. The men went to war, hunted, fished, provided the raw material for food and the tools necessary for these pursuits. The women cared for the house, and prepared food and clothing; they cooked, wove and sewed. Each was master in his or her own field of activity; the men in the forest, the women in the house.[20]

If we take into account that Engels is referring to hunters and gatherers, whereas our Mediterranean societies are based on an agrarian economy, the broad outlines of Engels' description still apply to the Athenian and Hebrew situations. When the Hebrew man is praised as someone well known, reference is made to the city gate, i.e. to the public sphere; the woman, by contrast, is praised for her domestic diligence by her husband and children, i.e. in the home rather than in the presence of wider society (Prov. xxxi 23,28). Yet, upon closer inspection, differences between our two cultures do appear. The Athenian wife should ideally not leave the home, but for the Hebrew wife we cannot be sure – the reference to the vineyard may imply her active involvement with its planting and other horticultural activities (Prov. xxxi 16). Otherwise, women's work in ancient Greece and Israel was largely identical.

Let us start with the Athenian elite household, the oikos as described by Xenophon. Assisted by a female housekeeper and a number of slaves, the wife is responsible for raising the children, storing the household utensils, managing food supplies, and whatever has to do with the domestic sphere; the husband, also assisted by slaves and a male overseer, takes care of all

[20] F. Engels, "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State" [1884], in: K. Marx and F. Engels, Selected Works in Two Volumes (Moscow, 1951), pp. 155-296, quotation p. 279.

that is done outside the home. This is essentially agricultural work, done by slaves and supervised by the husband. The man also spends much time in town, often just talking to friends and acquaintances such as Socrates; indeed, men need "the greatest amount of leisure to devote to their friends and their cities" (Oeconomicus vi 9). Lacking the time-consuming commitment of child rearing, "men are free to form those broader associations that we call society", i.e. the male society of the ancient polis.[21] Women maintain the home, men safeguard social life.

While there can be no doubt about the husband's general leadership within the family business, the division of labour gives the wife an important and, as it were, semi-independent role. Repeatedly, Ischomachus refers to the basic, divinely instituted division of labour between husband and wife:

> The god, from the very beginning, designed the nature of women for the indoor work and concerns, and the nature of man for the outdoor work (Oeconomicus vii 22). Well, wife, because we know what has been assigned to each of us by the god, we must each try to perform our respective duties as well as possible. The law encourages this, for it yokes together husband and wife, and just as the god made them partners in children, so the law has appointed them partners in the estate. And the law declares honourable those duties for which the god has made each of them more naturally capable. For the woman it is more honourable to remain indoors than to be outside; for the man it is more disgraceful to remain indoors than to attend to business outside (Oeconomicus vii 29-30). You [wife] will have to stay indoors and send forth the group of slaves whose work is outdoors, and personally supervise those whose work is indoors (Oeconomicus vii 35).

In other words: the duties of both partners are laid down by nature. Unlike the situation in modern households, then, there could be no confusion over who is responsible for what. Evidently, the regime does not work and its purpose – wellbeing – will never be achieved if the wife does not cooperate: "A wife who is a good partner in the estate (oikos) carries as much weight as her husband in attaining prosperity" (Oeconomicus iii 15).

Turning to the Hebrew household, it is logical to assume a division of labour essentially identical with that of the Athenian pattern. This is an inference, of course, for the Hebrew poem only briefly refers to the

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[21] M.Z. Rosaldo, "Women, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview", in: Women, Culture, and Society, ed. by M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford, 1974), pp. 17-42, on p. 24.

husband, mentioning merely the respected position he enjoys in town when devoting his leisure time to friends and urban politics: “Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land” (Prov. xxxi 23). Most of the poem describes how the wife excels in the discharge of her domestic duties – duties related essentially to the production of clothing and the preparation of food. “She looks well to the ways of her household (bayit), and does not eat the bread of idleness” (Prov. xxxi 27), reads the summary statement placed towards the end of the poem; put prosaically: she is not idle in her domestic duties. The basic pattern – the woman active in the house, and the man outside – is clearly visible. The same is true of the business partnership. “She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life” (Prov. xxxi 10b-12). This passage, placed near the beginning of the poem, summarizes what follows: a good wife is a profitable investment for her husband – and we should keep in mind here that a marriage is not a matter of the ‘heart’, but of the ‘head’ (for in Hebrew parlance, the man’s trusting heart is the seat not of his emotions but of his intellect).

How shall we imagine the role of the husband, a role that remains almost invisible in the poem? According to some commentators,[22] he is not involved with the management of his household and estate, for all is taken care of by his wife. Fully supported and cared for, he can devote all of his time and energy to other pursuits such as local politics, if not dedicating all of his life to undistracted religious learning and being a scholar-saint (an interpretation dear to those authors who wish to imitate this ideal known from medieval Jewish tradition[23]). On the basis of the comparative evidence adduced here, our answer must be that such a reading misconstrues the realities of life in ancient society. The husband must be seen as a wealthy landowner who, like all men of Hebrew antiquity, provides for his wife’s maintenance by supplying food and clothing (Exod. xxi 10); it would be shameful for him not to do so, and to be supported by his wife (Sir. xxv 22). Only in troubled times would a woman renounce her right to receive food and clothing from her husband (Isa. iv 1). Like Xenophon’s Ischomachus, the Hebrew husband is in full control of his estate and responsible for

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[22] See the names listed by McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife”, p. 27.
[23] A.B. Ehrlich, Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel (Leipzig, 1912), vol. 5, pp. 175-76. For Jewish women supporting their scholar-husbands, see R.M. Herweg, Die jüdische Mutter: Das verborgene Matriarchat (Darmstadt, 1994), pp. 87, 98-100, 105-106.

farming, i.e. for the main economic activity outside the home. In support of this assertion, we can invoke, apart from the analogy with Ischomachus, instructions given to the wealthy landowner elsewhere in the book of Proverbs – the poem ‘On Tending One’s Flocks’ (Prov. xxvii 23-27) which reads like a page from a farmer’s almanac. Some biblical passages, while not actually describing the gender-related division of labour, do indicate it, assigning agricultural toil to men and domestic work to women. Banned from paradise, the man works the ground, while the woman gives birth (Gen. iii 16-19). The king draws all of his subjects into his household, the men for making weapons and going to war, for ploughing and harvesting the royal domains, the women for cooking, baking and making perfumes (1 Sam. viii 11-13). That the poem on the ‘capable wife’ focuses on her considerable contribution to the household must not blind us to the undeniable fact that the ultimate economic basis of the upper-class Hebrew household is male-dominated agriculture, and not female-dominated domestic production of textiles and other goods for the market. The economic basis of the household as such is not worth very much, however, if there is not a ‘capable wife’ to take care of its domestic side.

From Proverbs xxxi it is clear that the Hebrew wife acts with much independence in her own sphere, and we found evidence for the same situation in Athenian society. The same must necessarily be true of the Hebrew husband, who also acts independently within his realm. This insight may help us solve one of the riddles of Decalogue interpretation. In the Decalogue, the head of an aristocratic Hebrew household is told to abstain from working on the Sabbath day, and the commandment is extended to include his sons and daughters, male and female slaves, oxen and donkeys and other livestock. Even resident aliens are included in this list – but, curiously, not his wife (Exod. xx 10; Deut. v 14). Read in terms of the gender-based division of labour, this omission makes sense: the man, technically, is considered here to be not the head of the entire household, but only of his personal estate to which, as in Islamic law, the children belong. The Sabbath commandment tells the husband not to make his dependents work on the seventh day of the week. He controls the labour force of his estate, but not that of his wife. He has no control over his wife’s estate, neither is he responsible for her, nor her slaves’, behaviour on the Sabbath day – this is her business. By not mentioning the wife, the very wording of the Decalogue respects the lines of command that exist within the household, and these lines follow the notion of the two separate spheres of

activity and the two separate estates. The Sabbath commandment, then, and the poem on the 'capable wife' are complementary, for the former describes the male, and the latter the female, domain within the one conjugal household.

The separation of the male and the female spheres reflects an important rule operating within hierarchically organized social systems – that of polarity.[24] In most cases, hierarchical groups are not simply led by one individual (or smaller group) that commands the rest. Typically, authority is divided between two mutually opposing as well as complementary principles, with one principle theoretically encompassing and guiding the other. In the case of the traditional household studied here, the two principles are the male and the female authority. The male authority encompasses that of the female. As long as the husband respects the autonomy of the female sphere and refrains from invading it, the system remains balanced and is prevented from dissolving into a unitary system of command dominated by the male head of the household. So the principle of polarity mitigates the asymmetrical power relationship within the household. There is another factor, however, that determines the social position of the wife: her access to property.

Female access to property

According to Friedrich Engels, the division of labour by gender, and the concomitant distinction between the male and the female spheres, existed in prehistoric primitive communism, where women enjoyed a status in no way inferior to that of men. Engels considered the differentiated social position of men and women a later development initiated by and based upon the notion of private property. While the idea of a primitive communism has generally been abandoned by social historians, they still believe that the status of women has something to do with economic rights. In most historic societies, women's economic rights were limited, but there are exceptions. In ancient Egypt, for instance, women could own private property in the form of land, servants and slaves, money and objects of value, and could manage it independently. [25] As we shall see, the two societies considered here differ in their attitude toward female ownership of property.

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[24] M. Douglas, In the Wilderness (JSOT.S 158, Sheffield, 1993), pp. 67-71 explains how 'complementary hierarchies' work; she notes her indebtedness to the work of the anthropologist L. Dumont.
[25] S. Wenig, Die Frau im Alten Ägypten (Vienna, 1969), p. 12.

Ischomachus's wife was fifteen when she entered his Athenian household, and because she was inexperienced he had to explain how he expected her to run the common enterprise. Ischomachus's set of fine instructions for his wife, praised by specialists for its lyrical qualities, goes into much detail. The essence is easy to understand: a household (oikos) is an economic unit, a family business based on the common capital of husband and wife, and the two share in the administration. In the words Ischomachus addressed to the girl: "We two share this estate (oikos). I go on paying everything I have into the common fund; and you deposited into it everything you brought with you. There is no need to calculate precisely which of us has contributed more" (Oeconomicus vii 13).

It is sometimes said that in antiquity, economic life was static, whereas the modern economy is dynamic, for investments are made and growth is defined as the central goal.[26] While modern economic life with its notions of capital, risk, and enterprise does differ from that of the ancients, the Greeks were not strangers to notions of growth. In Xenophon's Oeconomicus we find evidence for a dynamic conception of economic behaviour. Socrates, in fact, defines "estate management" (oikonomia) here as "the science by which men can increase their estates" (Oeconomicus vi 4). One element of estate improvement is the purchase of additional land to round off the property. The key here is to buy neglected land with little productivity and turn it into well-worked, productive fields (Oeconomicus xx 22-26). To get married also contributes to economic growth, for marriages are concluded to provide husbands with "fellow workers in improving [or increasing] their estates" (Oeconomicus iii 10). The main contribution to the increase apparently comes from the husband: "Property generally comes into the house through the exertions of the husband, but it is mostly dispensed through the housekeeping of the wife. If these activities [i.e., those of the housekeeping wife] are performed well, estates increase, but if they are managed incompetently, estates diminish" (Oeconomicus iii 15). So the wife's contribution comes into clear focus. The wife can increase the value of the household by training her slaves, says Ischomachus, for a female slave who previously did not know how to spin and acquires this skill is of double value; equally, all training in service and household management makes a slave invaluable (Oeconomicus vii 41).

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[26] R. Saller, "Framing the Debate over Growth in the Ancient Economy", in: The Ancient Economy, ed. by W. Scheidel and S. von Reden (Edinburgh, 2002), pp. 251-96.

The Athenian household, then, is a thoroughly patriarchal institution based on a small number of key ideas: the joint conjugal fund as its economic basis, the division of labour between husband and wife, and the distinction between slave work and that done by the householders, and the notion of economic growth. As for the common conjugal fund, there is one more detail worth noting: the absence of female land ownership. According to Sarah Pomeroy, "in Athens and in some other Greek states, women were not permitted to own land and to manage substantial amounts of wealth. ... They were like metics (resident aliens), who could also own only movables and money" as well as slaves.[27] In Athens land ownership and management was restricted to men, and Ischomachus would never have tolerated his wife's interference with his customary and legal rights to property. So while the wife may have brought slaves, furniture, and household utensils into the marital estate, she did not bring landed property.

In Proverbs, the ideas of economic growth and profit-making are as visible as they are in Xenophon's dialogue. Having married a good wife, i.e. one who contributes to the household, the husband "will have no lack of gain" (Prov. xxxi 11). The most conspicuous example given in the poem is the wife's investment of her own assets in land purchase and development. She buys a field which she makes more productive by turning it into a vineyard (Prov. xxxi 16); not only the purchase, but also the transformation of the field into a vineyard means that money has to be spent – workers have to be hired to prepare the ground, to build fences or walls, and to do the planting.[28] While the Hebrew wife's lucrative investment is in agreement with the shared Hebrew and Greek notion of economic growth, this verse could not figure in Xenophon's description of the Athenian model household. Ischomachus's wife would not have had the opportunity to consider the purchase, for she is legally unable to own land. But how about Hebrew law? Did it indeed permit women to buy and own land? The biblical law codes do not comment on the matter. Was landed property in Israel generally controlled by men? Evidence from narrative for female land ownership is, at best, unclear. Occasionally, reference is made to female

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[27] S. B. Pomeroy, Spartan Women (Oxford, 2002), p. 77, on the basis of D. M. Schaps, The Economic Rights of Women in Ancient Greece (Edinburgh, 1979). Unlike their Athenian counterparts, Spartan women did have access to land ownership.

[28] For a short list of jobs to be done when a vineyard is created, see Isa. v 2,5.

inheritance of land (Gen. xxxi 14; Job xlii 13-15), but these passages may be "but reminiscences of a vanished era when a wealthy father could assign a portion of his estate to all his children", including his daughters.[29] Raymond Westbrook concludes his review of the evidence by stating that "it is not certain that women could own property at all. The few references are obscure, and apply to women with sons. A possibility is that a widow held the land on trust for her son until majority".[30] In a comment on the capable wife's purchase of land, Westbrook seeks to accommodate it within the assumption of the impossibility of female ownership: "If a woman did not have capacity to own land, it does not mean that she could not act as agent for her husband to acquire (or alienate) on his behalf."[31]

If we follow Westbrook, the wife's (vicarious) purchase of land would be compatible with the Athenian legal situation. However, we cannot be sure, for, due to inadequate documentation, our understanding of Hebrew society remains very incomplete. It may actually have been possible for some women to own land and to make it profitable. This interpretation has occasionally been suggested, especially on the basis of evidence from the ancient Jewish military colony in Elephantine in Egypt, and recent feminist scholarship seeks to support it.[32] Inscriptional evidence dating from two periods – the eighth and seventh centuries BCE and around 100 CE – can also be invoked.[33] If this reading, and not that of Westbrook, is granted, the property rights of Hebrew women would be comparable to those of Greek

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[29] E. Lipinski, "nâhal", in: Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, ed. by G.J. Botterweck et al. (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1998), vol. 9, pp. 319-35, on p. 324.

[30] R. Westbrook, Property and the Family in Biblical Law (JSOT.S 113, Sheffield, 1991), p. 65.

[31] Westbrook, Property and the Family in Biblical Law, p. 80.

[32] L. Freund, Zur Geschichte des Ehegüterrechts bei den Semiten (Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historischen Klasse der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften 162, 1. Abhandlung, Wien, 1909), 44-55; C. Schäfer-Lichtenberger, "Beobachtungen zur Rechtsstellung der Frau in der alttestamentlichen Überlieferung", Wort und Dienst 24 (1997), pp. 95-120, on pp. 104-107. In this context one may also note the fact that in ancient Egypt, women could and did own property and enjoyed the same rights as did men: S. Wenig, Die Frau im Alten Ägypten (Vienna, 1969), p. 12.

[33] M. Heltzer, "About the Property Rights of Women in Ancient Israel", in: Shlomo: Studies in Epigraphy, Iconography, History and Archaeology in Honor of Shlomo Mousaieff, ed. by R. Deutsch (Tel Aviv 2003), pp. 133-38; H.M. Cotton, "Women and Law in the Documents from the Judaean Desert", in: Le rôle et le statut de la femme en Egypte hellénistique, romaine et byzantine, ed. by H. Melaerts and L. Mooren (Leuven, 2002), pp. 123-47, esp. pp. 126-30.

women living in the Hellenistic period. The latter could and did own property, though as a rule they could not engage in any major transaction without male (usually their husbands') consent. In ancient documents, therefore, we find regular reference to a woman's kyrios who, at least for legal purposes, acts as her guardian.[34] While legal guardianship may be seen as potentially restricting female liberty, familial circumstances may have given at least some Greek (and Jewish) women a certain degree of independence.

However, there is yet another attractive interpretation, one that is able to accommodate both the concept of female ownership of property and the opposite idea of its impossibility. This interpretation invokes the notion of 'custom' (consuetudo) as well as the related institution of 'customary law' known from legal history. Custom, like a coin, has two faces. The one, ideological, presents a picture of unchanging uniformity and stability over many generations, for people seem to cling tenaciously to the ways established in the remote past. The other, realistic, reveals that continuity is an illusion, and that things are in permanent flux, and are amenable to manipulation and change in the same measure as the leadership and the general mentality of a society. Recognized by medieval Jewish and Christian jurisprudence, customary law is prevailing custom understood as unwritten law; appealed to in the absence of written legislation, it is invoked with the help of representative members of society whom the judge interrogates in the case of a dispute.[35] It may well be that Hebrew custom was ambiguous, flexible, and, as it were, undecided about female land ownership. According to one tradition, represented by Proverbs xxxi 16, women could and did own land, but another saw land ownership as an exclusively male privilege. Generally speaking, "when [written] law is silent, it supports the dominant power structure and cultural values of a society".[36] To this, the anthropologist June Starr adds the observation that "the power structure is almost always controlled by adult males". Research

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[34] R. van Bremen, The Limits of Participation: Women and Civic Life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 205-36.

[35] P. Vinogradoff, "Customary Law", in: The Legacy of the Middle Ages, ed. by C.G. Crump and E.F. Jacobs (Oxford, 1926), pp. 287-319, esp. p. 288-91; M. Elon, Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles. Translated by B. Auerbach et al. (Philadelphia, 1994), vol. 2, pp. 880-944.

[36] J. Starr, "The Legal and Social Transformation of Rural Women in Aegean Society", in: Women and Property – Women as Property, ed. by R. Hirschon (London, 1984), pp. 92-116, on p. 92.

on the status of Jewish women demonstrates both flexibility and change in the matter of female ownership of immovable property. In early postbiblical Judaism, female ownership of property was increasingly limited: according to Mishnaic law, a wife's property acquired before marriage remains at her disposition, but everything acquired during her marriage is controlled by her husband;[37] post-Mishnaic jurisprudence tends to place all property owned by women under male control.[38] In the Middle Ages, by contrast, "married women owned property of their own and disposed of it by will. ... Some of the property seems to have been administered under a system of community and could be transferred only by the joint action of the spouses".[39] Given this flexibility, there is nothing strange in the assumption that in biblical times some households looked more or less like those of Athens, while others differed from this model. The author of the poem on the capable wife no doubt envisaged a household which allowed the wife to own property independently, such that one conjugal household existed, comprising. two independent estates.

Concluding observations

We may conclude by imagining how the wife of an upper-class ancient Athenian would feel when reading the biblical poem on the 'capable wife'.

Ischomachus's wife would certainly recognize her own role in the book of Proverbs' 'capable wife'. She would read it as a celebration of the good housewife's practical wisdom – her ability to participate in the management of a large estate and to increase its economic resources. But she would also note one major difference – that of the Hebrew woman's considered purchase, and subsequent management of, a vineyard. The following couplet would strike her as something she heard from her own husband:

> Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
> but a woman of intelligence[40] is to be praised. (Prov. xxxi 30)

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[37] J.R. Wegner, Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah (New York, 1988), p. 87.

[38] Freund, Zur Geschichte des Ehegüterrechts bei den Semiten, pp. 46-53; L.J. Archer, Her Price Is beyond Rubies: The Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine (JSOT.S 60, Sheffield, 1990), pp. 229-39; T. Ilan, Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine (Peabody, Mass., 1996), pp. 167-72.

[39] Z.W. Falk, Jewish Matrimonial Law in the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1966), p. 145.

[40] This must be the original reading, as it is preserved in the Septuagint. The Hebrew text – "a woman who fears Yahweh" – reflects pious editing.

When reading these lines, she would remember how in his detailed instructions to her, Ischomachus mentioned a subject apparently of much concern to her: will others respect me once I am old and no longer enjoy the privilege of youthful beauty? How will I be treated by my husband and my children? Is it not a general experience that older women are treated with disrespect? Familiar with these concerns, Ischomachus argued (perhaps somewhat too optimistically) that the status enjoyed by the wife in the household has nothing to do with beauty; the more virtue the wife has demonstrated over the years in the discharge of her duties, the more she will be respected. “You may be confident”, he insisted, “that when you become older, the better partner you have been to me, and the better guardian of the estate for the children, the greater respect you will enjoy in the household. For it is not because of youthful grace that beautiful and good things increase for human beings, but rather because of the virtues of the latter” (Oeconomicus viii 42-43). The poem as a whole celebrates female efficiency, and not erotic attraction. Marriage, after all, is for economic purposes, and not for satisfying a man’s romantic appetite for female beauty.

A closer look at the Athenian household not only enriches our understanding of a biblical poem, but also sharpens our appreciation of the female contribution to well-ordered human life. In order to give the already venerable manual of sapiential instruction a final touch, an editor might have added a concluding page to show that all the wisdom taught to men is of little value if not accompanied and indeed perfected by the female competence so eloquently praised by the eulogist.

Abstract

Major topics that feature in the capable wife’s portrait in Prov. xxxi 10-31 – domestic manufacture of clothing, female responsibility for food, and the upper-class wife’s supervision of the slaves’ indoor work – can also be illustrated from Xenophon’s Oeconomicus, a fourth-century B.C.E. Greek manual of estate management. This treatise also explains how labour in the household (oikos) is divided according to gender. Unlike her Athenian counterpart, the Hebrew wife seems able to own and manage landed property from which she derives independent income. The rule ‘one conjugal household, two estates’ – the wife’s and the husband’s separate estates – may sum up the economic situation presupposed, but not

explained, by the poem. While the Hebrew poem celebrates only the contribution of the wife, we should not forget that it was her husband who provided the household’s economic basis, presumably from an agricultural estate.