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The Proverbs 31 Woman: Entrepreneurial Epitome?

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Abstract: *This article provides an exegesis of Proverbs 31:10-31 from an economic perspective, portraying the Proverbs 31 woman as an ideal entrepreneur. She is industrious, generous, and pious in all her actions, specializing in small-scale capitalist production. As such, her behavior is consistent with the vision of entrepreneurship found in Mises and Knight. Proverbs is part of the biblical “wisdom” literature, and the specific texts viewed are intended to showcase her worthiness. Her actions are provided as proof that “many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all,” and provide a model to emulate. The woman (or man) who serves consumers effectively in private markets will bring honor to her (his) household while securing the material goods necessary to serve her (his) family and the poor. The profit gained in her entrepreneurial activity is described as unquestionably good, providing a powerful rebuke towards Marxist thought that profit is necessarily exploitive. JEL Codes: P110, P190, Z120; keywords: biblical entrepreneur, profit, free markets.*

1. Introduction

The financial crisis of 2008 has once again ruptured the always tentative and temporary “cease-fire” between those favoring private enterprise and those who favor government control of what they view as inherently unstable (and often immoral) market processes. Sowell (2007) suggests this never-ending conflict is due to differing visions, with fundamental differences in understanding the way the world works. The debate is largely over whether an emergent order can outperform a rationally directed economy (whether by outright control or simply via regulation); this lends itself to a comparison of the results of differing institutional arrangements. Yet this is not the only dimension being contested. When the conflict over the role of government in the economy spilled over to the national debt debate in 2011, Arthur Brooks of the American Enterprise Institute correctly noted that in the on-going public dialogue, “it is progressives, not free marketeers, who use the language of morality” (Brooks, 2011). Brooks finds this ironic, since he

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asserts, “statists have a more materialistic philosophy than free-enterprise advocates.” He concludes by suggesting that any leader championing liberty must be willing to do whatever it takes to win the moral fight in favor of free enterprise—that leader cannot win the hearts of the people simply based on arguments of efficiency and productivity.

Brooks’ admonition to those favoring free markets to make an effective moral argument is increasingly necessary. A 2011 poll by the Public Religion News Survey found almost half the survey sample (46 percent) believe that Christian values and capitalism are incompatible, while 61 percent disagree that “most businesses would act ethically without regulation from government.” Further, the survey found young people are far more likely to support higher taxes as well as believe that wealth inequalities are one of the country’s biggest problems.¹ A 2010 poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public life on Millennials found that 67 percent of young people aged 18-29 (68 percent of young evangelicals) prefer bigger government.² Further, young evangelicals are increasingly attracted to expanding the view of the gospel to include social justice.³ Young people in general, and Christian youth in particular, are demanding “just” defenses of markets and capitalism.

I will not answer the broader question of which institutional economic arrangements are most consistent with biblical values in this paper; rather I will provide an exegesis of the Proverbs 31 text to argue that profit earned in effective service to others can be part of a life praised by God. Exegesis of this poem will help clarify the debate by rejecting two extreme positions: 1) that profit is inherently exploitive, and 2) that profit is unconditionally positive. A thorough examination of the biblical Proverbs 31 woman offers strong conclusions about the morality of profit, the way profit should be obtained, and under what conditions pursuit of profit is consistent with Christian morality.

2. Proverbs 31 Overview

Proverbs is part of biblical wisdom literature, believed by orthodox Christians and Jews to be inspired by God. Most of the proverbs are attributed to King Solomon, or compiled by him, but the last two proverbs are attributed to Agur and Lemuel. King Lemuel may in fact be King Solomon, as is held by Jewish tradition, and his proverb includes two poems, The Wise King (31: 2-9) and The Excellent Wife (31: 10-31), which were taught to him by a godly mother (Fox 2009, 882). Proverbs 31 culminates the Book of Proverbs by describing an exceptional

woman who is worthy of praise. This is an important text to consider, as the entire section is intended to unambiguously attribute her actions as demonstrations of her virtue. Many other biblical passages that appear to support free markets (such as the 8th and 10th commandments' defense of private property rights) are often described by those on the Christian left (such as Ron Sider) as simply a relative right, not an absolute right.⁴ There is thus no practical limitation on what government can do in directing market activities. Without conceding that point, the actions of the Proverbs 31 woman (herein P31W) are specifically identified to demonstrate her worth; her praiseworthy actions include the essentials of free enterprise. Verses 10-12 introduce her value as excellent, vv. 13-27 describe the actions that demonstrate her excellence, and vv. 28-31 highlight the praise of which she is worthy—the result of her actions.

The P31W text is written as an acrostic, such that the initial consonant of each verse follows the order of the Hebrew alphabet.⁵ Following Gottwald (1962, 32), Waltke (2005) suggests the acrostic structure indicates a full expression of possible praise; nothing more can be said since it has been covered “A” to “Z.”⁶ As suggested above, there are no “mixed” messages here—the P31W cannot be praised more. Longman (2006) expands on this idea, suggesting the P31W is the human reflex of Woman Wisdom featured earlier in Proverbs;⁷ and while an ideal type, she embodies desirable attributes. Waltke echoes the comparison to Woman Wisdom, but nevertheless argues the P31W belongs in the historical realm, not the allegorical. He cites an unpublished paper by Moore, who argues that the poem's use of military language in the Hebrew suggests the godly wife is a “spiritual heir of Israel's ancient heroes” (514). Interestingly, she is praised in part because of her skills as an entrepreneur, yet in a literature written almost exclusively for males, the illustrations of her worth do not highlight her beauty, but rather her strength.

In asserting the P31W is praised in part for her skills as an entrepreneur, we must recognize the economy of ancient Palestine is not a modern developed economy. Nevertheless, exegesis of the P31W poem provides essential insights on entrepreneurship and free markets. For our analysis, the essence of free markets is simply the presence of private property rights over goods produced and the freedom to enter into mutually beneficial exchange.⁸ Both of these conditions are documented in the P31W poem as well as broader historical records. In her socioeconomic analysis of Proverbs 31, Yoder (2003) provides a rich literature review of the ancient Persian period and concludes that Palestine was part of a robust international commercial market when the poem was written. Females

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in this era had extensive commercial opportunities, ranging from the textile industry to credit markets; “what had been largely a subsistence agricultural economy in the pre-exilic and exilic periods developed into a cosmopolitan marketplace” (439-40). Yoder concludes that the poem’s language suggests the P31W’s household and associated activities are part of “just such a marketplace” (441). Silver (1995) also documents the opportunities for entrepreneurial women in ancient societies, specifically identifying the P31W’s trading activities with the Canaanites (merchants). As the exegesis below will demonstrate, the P31W’s activity featured the essentials of what we would find in a modern small business, and fulfills the requirements for both Misesian and Knightian entrepreneurship.

3. Exegesis⁹

- ¹⁰An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
¹¹The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
¹²She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.

The difficulty of finding an excellent wife is wisdom from Lemuel’s mother;¹⁰ if you can find this type woman you have something exceedingly rare, far more precious than jewels. While seemingly a rhetorical question, “who can find?,” the verset B suggests a relative rather than absolute answer;¹¹ the rarity is intended to focus on how precious she is.¹² The answer of “almost no one” supports the argument that while an ideal type, the P31W attributes are nevertheless an achievable goal. Other translations replace the ESV’s “excellent” with virtuous, valiant or noble character; the Hebrew transliteration¹³ (*chayil*) is associated with strength, might, military force, ability, efficiency and wealth. Longman argues that the military language of the whole poem illustrates a woman who is “engaged in the battle of life, dealing with people and winning advantage for her family.”¹⁴ This suggests the P31W will be a fierce competitor in all her commercial activities. Those who are troubled by the competitive nature of market processes will find little solace in the Hebrew language; the P31W competes fiercely to serve others and benefit her family and community. Because of this competitive service, her husband will trust in her, and he will have no lack of gain (or spoil/plunder of war, as indicated by the Hebrew *shalal*). The term for trust (*batach*) indicates a setting of

one's hope or confidence in someone, usually (when in a positive sense) used for trusting in God. Her husband can have this deep trust in her in part, because "she goes out and fights on behalf of her family and comes back with the victor's spoils."¹⁵ Her success frees her husband for other pursuits, where he too will obtain honor (v.23), the familial division of labor profiting all.

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

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

¹⁵She rises while it is yet night
and provides food for her household
and portions for her maidens.

The meaning of *chayil* (excellent, or valiant) in v10 of the poem becomes clear in subsequent verses, which describe the actions of the P31W.¹⁶ In vv. 13-15, we find a woman who is first and foremost a hard worker. She is engaged in multiple production activities, and is intimately involved with each; a theme that will be repeated in vv. 19, 22, 24 and 27. While having servants as part of her household production (v15, presumably also involved in some of her commercial activities), the P31W works with *willing* hands (or hands "in delight" as in the Hebrew *chephets*). She enjoys the work that she sets before her; the wool and flax are used to produce clothes for her household, her servants and for market exchange. Lest we underestimate the importance of this "cottage industry," consider Waltke's summary of the importance of her trade signified in v14:

Her weaving industry provides the economic foundation for her trade for exquisite food from far-off places. Claire Gottlieb documents that in ancient societies women who had acquired skills in spinning and weaving were greatly admired and desired. In Elephantine a good woolen garment would cost over two months' wages and an inexpensive linen one half of a month's wage... *she becomes like trading vessels* signifies trading that is prudently planned, diligently executed and enterprisingly ventured; the plural suggests the multitude of her purchases.¹⁷

As Waltke (and Yoder above) note, her trade is part of a cosmopolitan marketplace—the P31W uses her monetary profits to purchase goods from

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afar, and the Canaanites she trades with purchase her goods for resale (see v24 below). The materials the P31W uses (flax) and the dye of her clothes are imported and her products are exported; the success of the P31W's enterprise and her high standard of living are dependent upon some measure of international free trade.¹⁸ Verse 15 continues both the hardworking emphasis and the battle-focus. The P31W rises early to serve her household; she follows the English proverb that "the early bird gets the worm." She is committed first to serving; her personal needs such as sleep are secondary. The food she provides her household is most frequently translated in the Bible elsewhere as prey (Hebrew *tereph*). Combined with the arising before daylight, the imagery suggests a lioness that arises while it is still night to capture prey to bring back to her cubs.¹⁹ McCreech expands on this thought, suggesting, "At the very least, this word represents provisions acquired only after the exercise of great strength, prowess, and ingenuity, and would seem to commend the extraordinary ability of the wife in providing for her household even against great odds."²⁰ Seeking "prey" in her commercial activities cannot be seen as evil; as seen in v30, this is a woman who fears the LORD.²¹

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

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

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

As already shown, commercial activities are an integral part of the P31W's plan to serve her household and community. Yet verse 16 adds significantly to this portrait; it is perhaps the most interesting verse of the poem from an economic perspective. To appreciate its significance, we must examine the Hebrew word for consider, *zamam*. *Zamam* means to have a thought, to devise, to plan, to purpose. It is often used to describe evil, e.g. to plot or scheme, such as "the wicked plot." Nevertheless, God himself also engages in "*zamam*," as in Lam 2:17, "The LORD has done what He purposed." This word describes a detailed level of planning; when speaking of God it is a plan from eternity past. For the wicked, one may have the idea of Osama bin Laden planning an attack on the United States for years, with attendant actions and revisions to the plan during the planning period. It is a significant, focused consideration of future possibilities, examining alternative means/ends frameworks to

accomplish a goal, imagining potential future states, with resolute action as its attendant goal.²² The P31W did not make an impulsive purchase; this came about after a detailed consideration of her opportunities. She had to assess how purchasing a field might expand her future ability to serve her household and others, as well as how current market realities made this her best choice. Why not rather expand her clothing production instead? As Waltke suggests, she “carefully considered this (the purchase of the field) from *all angles*” (emphasis added).²³

Entrepreneurial action described in v16 is part of the overall portrait of the P31W’s praiseworthiness; she is carefully planning how to enlarge her territory and expand her influence. Increasing her capital through hard work and careful planning is part of praiseworthy stewardship of the resources God has entrusted to her; the biblical admonition to be content in all situations does not imply one should not maximize the output of resources under control. Just as ambition is not condemned, but selfish ambition is (James 3:14), so pursuit of material resources to more effectively serve others is praised while selfish pursuit of wealth is condemned (James 4:3).

The entrepreneurial action of the P31W to *zamam* closely aligns with Ludwig Von Mises’ entrepreneurial function of appraisal.²⁴ Von Mises identifies the critical function of entrepreneurship as “acting man in regard to changes occurring in the data of the market.”²⁵ Entrepreneurs are called to appraise valuations and plans in light of constantly changing data, appraising valuations of the whole structure of production—especially higher order capital goods such as a vineyard. The P31W considered well, imagining the future. She based her expectations of the future in part from past experience, and in part on her ability to shape the future. She appraised the field’s possibilities in light of current and expected future market conditions. Her appraisal—in the full sense of *zamam*—allowed her to assign or impute a value to the field, which she ultimately used as the basis of her bid to purchase the field. While her action was necessarily speculative, as all true entrepreneurial action is, we will see in v25 that she has a reason for confidence in her speculative activities.

In verset B of v16, the P31W is able to plant a vineyard in her newly acquired field from profits from her sale of clothes, e.g., the fruit of her hands.²⁶ Verse 17 adds to this, speaking of her physical strength in her whole body (loins and arms); she is able to carry out her tasks. Strength is not seen as an exclusively male attribute in the Bible,²⁷ and many other leading female biblical characters actively engaged in physical and menial labor seemingly below their station, to include Sarah (Gen 18:6-8), Rebekah

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(Gen 24:18-20) and Rachel (Gen 29:9-10).²⁸ While she undoubtedly had servants to aid in much of the physical labor, such as clearing the field and planting a vineyard, she is actively involved in all her activities, and physical strength enables her to accomplish her objectives.

In verse 18, the P31W perceives that her merchandise is profitable; or as the NASB translates, *she senses her gain is good*. In the English language, we clearly see that she evaluates her trading, and determines that it is profitable. However, to understand the powerful implications of this text, we must consider the meaning of the Hebrew word for perceives, or senses, *ta`am*. *Ta`am* is used eleven times in the Bible, and is translated “to taste” (ten times), or “to perceive mentally” (once, here in Proverbs). This indicates an experiential perception of the goodness of her gain, she “tastes” it, and “tries the flavor.” What does she taste or experience? That her gain (Hebrew *cachar*) is good; *cachar* can mean traffic, profit, gain, or market. The Hebrew word for good, *towb*, is the broadest category of good, to include rich, pleasant, kind, and right (ethical). There is no hint that is a qualified good, but rather, as Waltke suggests, her profitable trading is beneficial to life and therefore desirable and valuable.²⁹ Combining the three meanings of *ta`am*, *cachar* and *towb*, we see the P31W is doing more than merely determining revenues exceed costs; the experiential process of the totality of her market activities lead her to conclude her gain is good. While her trading may be considered small scale, it requires the use of capital equipment (v.19) and contract labor to support (v.15); her profit therefore is derived from the essentials of what we might find in a modern small business.

Interestingly, the same combination of Hebrew words (*ta`am* and *towb*) is used only one other time in the Bible, in Psalm 34:8, “O taste and see that the LORD is good.” In this verse, the Psalmist suggests that God can be experienced, and the experience will demonstrate God’s goodness. The LORD occupies the same position relative to “perceive” and “good” in the sentence structure as the profit (or gain) of Proverbs 31:18! While the biblical texts are clearly not trying to equate God and profit, the similar grammatical treatment supports a positive view of profit obtained in the manner of the P31W. While this scripture should not be used to argue that all profit is unambiguously good, it nevertheless is decisive against claims that profitable market exchanges are necessarily exploitative and immoral.³⁰ Verse 18 therefore provides a powerful rebuke to those who believe the Bible is against all profit, or that profit is inherently exploitive. Many commentators suggest verset B of v18 indicates the P31W works well into the night.³¹ If taken literally, the P31W would never go to sleep;

Waltke therefore offers an alternative interpretation: the P31W experiences the “good” of enjoying the enduring wealth described in verset A.³²

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

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

Verses 19 and 20 provide a major rationale for why the P31W is so highly exalted, as well as additional context as to why the profit noted in verse 18 is good. In v19, she resumes her productive activities with her hands grasping and working with her capital equipment; in v20 her hands are extended to give to the poor. As Van Leeuwen concludes, “The hands that grasp to produce, open wide to provide.”³³ The P31W has a purpose behind her plans; the full *zamam* seen earlier includes a consideration of how her commercial activities will serve others. She will gain the material resources to serve her family, her maidens (servants) and the poor. The wisdom literature is replete with admonitions to serve the poor; she exemplifies Woman Wisdom through her hard work serving in the market and in her generosity to the poor. The end of the poem will praise the P31W; the praise is for both her wisdom and her action, truly for her wisdom in action. To be blessed, one must produce and one must be generous. The goodness of profit seen in verse 18 has a context: profit earned by productive service to others in markets enables service to those outside market exchange.

²¹She is not afraid of snow for her household,
for all her household are clothed in scarlet....

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

Verses 21 and 25 convey the P31W’s confident attitude toward the future—she is future oriented in all her plans. She is able to face an uncertain future with a confidence that almost borders on arrogance—she laughs at whatever may come her way. We know the intent of the poem is to laud the woman, to show her high value and to bring her praise, so the confidence cannot be based on arrogance. Indeed, v30 will share the ultimate basis of her confidence is she fears the LORD, where biblical fear means to stand in awe of, to revere, honor and respect God. She knows the future is completely in His hands, and He is trustworthy. But she is

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not simply waiting on God to deliver her; no, v21 shows that she can face the specific uncertainty of cold weather because she has prepared her household for it. Waltke notes that “clothed in crimson” refers to costly wool, since linen does not readily accept dye.³⁴ She has prepared the best way possible, and can now rest in the providence of God. Further, she has “strength and dignity” for clothing, signifying these character traits are as much a part of her as her clothing. These traits prepare her for any uncertain state of affairs. Finally, the P31W can rest in God’s providence because she is acting in complete accord with His will; she serves herself, her household, and the community — ultimately extending her hands to the poor. There is, therefore, no need to fear God’s chastening.

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

²⁴She makes linen garments and sells them;
she delivers sashes to the merchant.

Verses 22 and 24 continue the productive activity of the P31W, as she prepares goods for herself and for her commercial activities. Verse 22 is significant in that this noble woman is not expected to live a life of poverty; as she serves others she also serves herself. Her clothing is “fine linen,” probably imported from Egypt, and dyed with expensive purple (as she did with her household in v21).³⁵ As she is praised in v31, “Give her of the fruit of her hands;” the laborer is entitled to the fruit of his or her labor. While others may question the lavishness or necessity of expensive clothing, there is no hint of impropriety in God’s sight.³⁶ If anything, the positive defense in this poem illustrates God’s desire to bless those walking completely in accord with his ways. Verse 24 provides the other side of the trade equation; she produces to sell. She exports to foreign traders³⁷ so that she might import those foreign delicacies unavailable in her home country. While not stated here, we can expect the same level of *zamam* (careful planning) in the conduct of enterprise described in v16. The P31W has been diligent to understand the needs of these tradesmen, determining how she might best serve them, so she will “perceive that her merchandise is profitable.”

In addition to the entrepreneurial attribute of appraisal seen in v16, The P31W’s willingness to produce goods for future sale is illustrative of Frank Knight’s definition of entrepreneurship as bearing “true uncertainty.”³⁸ In Knight’s view of distribution, entrepreneurship earns its reward not by bearing risk (whose outcomes can be characterized

by a probability distribution), but rather by handling the vagaries of an uncertain future. The P31W produces to meet the demand of traveling merchants—demand for which she cannot calculate probabilities. The P31W bears Knight’s true uncertainty and must make superior forecasts of future consumer needs; she must decide “what to do and how to do it.”³⁹ By bearing the uncertainty of future market demand, the P31W serves consumers by allowing them to husband resources; they can plan the timing of their purchases of her high quality goods with trips to the market where she sells her products. What is it about the P31W that gives her this willingness to bear Knightian uncertainty? It is precisely her confidence in the future identified in vv. 21, 25; as a woman who fears the LORD, she can trust the promise of Proverbs 21:5, that “The plans of the diligent lead *surely* to advantage” (emphasis added).

²³Her husband is known in the gates
when he sits among the elders of the land.

The P31W brings honor to her husband such that he is known or respected in the gates. Her godly living brings him honor, for she has clothed him well. She has been a successful entrepreneur serving the broader community with her productive activities. Her mercy and compassion to the poor are well known, confirming Prov. 12:4, “An excellent wife is the crown of her husband.” Her productivity allows him to take a seat of leadership in the gates with the other elders of the land; he dispenses wisdom and justice to the people.⁴⁰

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

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

In the final verses that demonstrate her praiseworthiness, the itemized list reaches its climax, transcending the routine tasks of life with which she has excelled, to the moral and spiritual qualities of wisdom and lovingkindness.⁴¹ She has not only the beginning of biblical wisdom (fear of the LORD), but she has words that are godly, righteous, and strategic to successful living.⁴² Her wisdom is not received as hypocrisy; the previous verses demonstrate her wisdom is lived daily and provides a witness to the community. Verse 27 illustrates her on-going activity to manage her total affairs, including her commercial activities. “Looks well” in the

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Hebrew, *tsaphah*, signifies a close watching, such as that a spy might do. No detail is missed, a careful assessment of household affairs is made continually; Waltke suggests a meaning of watching vigilantly to keep a “sharp lookout” over her affairs.⁴³ The concept of *tsaphah*, combined with our earlier discussion of *zaman*, conveys the idea of continuous appraisal necessary for an ideal entrepreneur. She is constantly evaluating the environment (to include market activities and prices) to keep her plans on track and make changes where necessary. She will not “eat the bread of idleness;” she will boldly act with confidence when necessary to adjust her plans.

²⁸Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:

²⁹“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.”

³⁰ Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

³¹Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates.

The poem culminates with extensive praise for the P31W; her husband suggests her accomplishments are unparalleled, as Longman states, “She is the noblest of the noble.”⁴⁴ Verse 30 contrasts the world’s values with biblical values: the worldly values of beauty and charm deceitfully promise happiness they cannot provide, whereas fear of the LORD prompts one to act as listed in vv. 13-27, which will lead to true happiness.⁴⁵ As discussed above, v31 implies a normative endorsement of private property (the fruit of her hands), but it also suggests her commercial activities produce such high quality goods that she will receive praise in the public square. The P31W is a blessing to her husband, her family, her servants, the poor and the community that purchases her goods—she is worthy to be praised.

4. Implications and conclusion

As Wolters (1988, 454) notes, the poem is a “portrait of verbs” describing the woman’s actions. There are only two adjectives which describe not the woman but her merchandise (V13) and her rivals (v29). She is wisdom in action; the text does not support praise for the woman separate from her actions. Further, the unambiguous praise for the P31W must be understood from the totality of her actions as seen in vv. 13-27, not from any individual

action. Many biblical characters create wealth, but few are praised. The analysis of Proverbs 31 provides support for free markets based on the freedom to serve others effectively; it values free markets instrumentally. The complete set of actions praised in Proverbs 31 is only possible in the context of free market institutions: to give you have to possess; to possess, you have to produce; to produce, you must have freedom to act. This does not mean that only free market institutional arrangements could lead to some of the P31W's praiseworthy actions. One can certainly care for the poor, work hard for one's family, serve the broader community, etc., in many institutional settings. Nevertheless, the totality of her actions, especially the praise she receives for her entrepreneurial actions, is only possible in the context of free markets. Likewise, the totality of her praiseworthy actions includes generous support to the poor; the goodness of her profit cannot be separated from how she earned it and how she would use it. By serving consumers effectively in markets, God-fearing people will have the resources necessary to care for their household and the broader society.

Careful exegesis of scripture often provides a richness that a superficial reading may conceal; such is the case with Proverbs 31. Many critics of free markets invoke ethical concerns over the outcomes of markets, with some suggesting that the market process itself brings out the worst greed in humanity. Proverbs 31 provides a strong counterargument; free markets can be an integral part of broader service to others. Profit is seen not as necessarily exploitive, but as a demonstration of successful service to others. Profit provides the resources to be able to extend service beyond those directly involved in exchange, to the poor and the community. Possessing wealth is considered a blessing, if one keeps fear of the LORD as a guiding principle.⁴⁶ Proverbs 31 demonstrates that the problem with materialism is not the materials, but how the human heart relates to the blessings we receive in life.

Endnotes

- 1 See <http://publicreligion.org/research/2011/04/plurality-of-americans-believe-capitalism-at-odds-with-christian-values/>
- 2 See <http://pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx>
- 3 See <http://www.barna.org/culture-articles/462-six-megathemes-emerge-from-2010>. Defining social justice biblically is well beyond the scope of this paper, despite the value that might provide. Here we mean the term

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as often loosely applied by young people, that of simply concern with supporting the poor and working toward removing obstacles (however defined) that limit their ability to flourish, and judging social justice from an outcome (vs process) perspective.

- 4 See Sider (2005), 90.
- 5 Waltke (2005), 514.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Such as in Proverbs 1:20-21, where wisdom is personified as a woman. Woman Wisdom is contrasted in Proverbs 8-9 with the loose woman of Proverbs 7.
- 8 While not required for the “essence” of free markets, indirect exchange with money enables monetary calculation and the appraisal function of entrepreneurship. Yoder (2003) documents that the Persian Empire (to include Palestine) had an extensive monetary economy.
- 9 Quotes are from the English Standard Version (ESV).
- 10 Some commentators argue that the P31W is an allegory of “Woman Wisdom” of Proverbs (cf. 1:20-33; 8:1-36; 9:1-6), see Waltke (2005), 515-518. This paper follows Waltke’s conclusion that the valiant wife is a historical, not allegorical, figure.
- 11 Waltke (2005), 521.
- 12 Fox (2009), 891.
- 13 All references to the original Hebrew language and meanings were made using the Blue Letter Bible website, <http://www.blueletterbible.org/> which integrates data compiled from Strong’s Concordance. Comparisons to the original Hebrew or Greek can be found using either the King James Version or the New American Standard Version.
- 14 Longman (2006), 542.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 543.
- 16 Waltke (2005), 521.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 524.
- 18 Yoder (2003), 441-442.
- 19 Longman (2006), 524.
- 20 As cited in Longman (2006), 525.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 For examples of these traits in conjunction with *zamam* (H2161 in Strong’s *Concordance*) see <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H2161&t=NASB>.
- 23 Waltke (2005), 525.
- 24 Some might question the appropriateness of highlighting the P31W as an entrepreneurial epitome when she did not exemplify Schumpeter’s

view of entrepreneurship as “creative destruction.” While creative destruction may be the outcome of entrepreneurship, it is not the essence of entrepreneurial activity—further, it is more an outcome during times of rapid technological or organizational change. The two views of entrepreneurship (Mises and Knight) I highlight in this paper are, in my view, more to the essence of what an entrepreneur actually does, and are more broadly applicable across time and institutional settings.

25 Von Mises (1966), 254.

26 Waltke (2005), 525.

27 Longman (2006), 544.

28 Waltke (2005), 525.

29 *Ibid.*, 526.

30 A hermeneutic that asserts that profit is inherently bad would also have to assert that the LORD could be inherently bad; an obviously wrong conclusion.

31 Such as Longman (2006), 544; Fox (2009), 895; and Delitzsch and Meinhold as cited in Waltke (2005), 526.

32 Waltke (2005), 526.

33 As cited in Waltke (2005), 527.

34 Waltke (2005), 530.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Of course lavish clothing can be a symptom of immoral behavior such as seen in Isaiah 3:16-26, where women are not walking in accord with God’s plan and receive his condemnation.

37 The merchants referenced here are *Kěna`an* in Hebrew, or Canaanites. Canaanites were so well known for trading that their name became synonymous with roving traders. Their name derived from the red purple of shellfish from the Phoenician coast which they exported (cited in Waltke 2005, 512).

38 Knight (2002 [1921]), 20.

39 *Ibid.*, 268.

40 The biblical model shown here has private enterprise creating wealth to support and enable civic justice. This is exactly the inverse of modern crony capitalism, where the state is used to provide privilege to some that they may obtain wealth at the expense of others. Crony capitalism is antithetical to biblical values, which require lack of partiality or favoritism (Lev. 19:15, James 2).

41 Waltke (2005), 532.

42 Longman (2006), 547.

43 Waltke (2005), 532.

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44 Longman (2006), 548.

45 Waltke (2005), 535.

46 The P31W has her counterpart in Psalm 112, where among many similarities, the blessed man fears the Lord (Wolters 1988, 448).

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