

---

Dunamis: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristiani

Volume 7, Nomor 2 (April 2023)

ISSN 2541-3937 (print), 2541-3945 (online)

<https://www.sttintheos.ac.id/e-journal/index.php/dunamis>

DOI: 10.30648/dun.v7i2.1049

---

Submitted: 10 Februari 2023	Accepted: 1 Maret 2023	Published: 27 Maret 2023
-----------------------------	------------------------	--------------------------

## **Examining the Representation of Women as Wise Authorities and Alpha Women in the Book of Proverb**

**Bimbing Kalvari<sup>1</sup>; Idrus Sasirais<sup>2\*</sup>**

Jakarta Theological Seminary (STFT Jakarta), Indonesia<sup>1</sup>

Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Gereja Kalimantan Evangelis (STT GKE), Indonesia<sup>2</sup>

*idrusgke@gmail.com\**

### **Abstrak**

The Book of Proverbs contains numerous moral teachings and wise sayings. However, the representation of women in this book is often depicted as unequal and unjust, particularly regarding their status and roles. This article aimed to assess the representation of women in the Book of Proverbs and explore how they can be perceived as authoritative sources of wisdom and as alpha women. Through an exegetical study that examines theologians' views on women's representation in the Book of Proverbs, the role of women in this book will be analyzed to reclaim their status as wise individuals and strong women in both private and public realms. This understanding is crucial for creating a gender-balanced and equitable interpretation that is not influenced by patriarchal cultural norms.

**Kata Kunci:** alpha women; private; Proverbs; public; wise authorities

## INTRODUCTION

The Book of Proverbs contains many lessons for readers, particularly regarding leading virtuous and moral lives. However, the book also features many unbalanced and unjust representations of women, particularly regarding their roles and status. These representations can reinforce stereotypes and influence how women are treated in society, even though they can be interpreted differently to yield fairer interpretations. In the interest of gender fairness, this presentation will examine how women are depicted in the Book of Proverbs and their roles in both the public and private spheres. It will describe the perspectives of scholars and attempts to understand the role of women in the private and public domains more clearly. This presentation aims to reclaim what is rightfully due to women in the context of Proverbs.

This presentation aims to examine the representation of women in the Book of Proverbs and their roles in both the public and private spheres. It will analyze the perspectives of scholars like Carole R. Fontaine, who highlights the active role of women in the Israeli wisdom tradition and views women as wisdom players. The definition of a wise person is expanded to include women who are practitioners or carriers of the wisdom tradition. Other scholars also support the idea that not just men but also many wo-

men are wise people in the context of the Book of Proverbs. The findings indicate that women play a crucial role as sources of wisdom in the Book of Proverbs, both in the private and public domains.

Women are depicted as wise people who play essential roles in household affairs, such as managing the household and providing education on religion and morality. They are also depicted as leaders in their communities and provide advice that is sought by a wider society. However, women are also depicted in negative roles in both private and public spheres. Scholars such as Fontaine see that even in these negative roles, there is an underlying understanding that the women depicted in these negative roles are wise people, but they are not adequately connected with human interpretative characteristics that can represent this understanding. In this writing, the author offers the term “alpha women” to the negatively depicted wise people. The presentation ends with suggestions for further research and affirmation that efforts to reclaim the experiences and representation of women as wisdom agents and alpha women in the Book of Proverbs are possible with creative interpretation.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The methodology employed in this study was a literature review in the field of

interpretative studies. The researcher examined theologians' perspectives on the depiction of women in the Book of Proverbs, focusing on verses that highlight women as sources of wisdom. The researcher then analyzed and organized these findings based on emerging themes. This approach will enhance the analysis and guarantee that the portrayal of women as sources of wisdom and powerful women (alpha women) in the Book of Proverbs is credible and trustworthy.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

### A Brief Survey of the Wisdom Tradition in the Book of Proverbs

The root word for Proverbs is the Hebrew word מִשַׁל. Its exact meaning is unclear, but it can be associated with the term "rule" or "becoming like" in the form of comparison. The uniqueness of Proverbs, among other wisdom books, is the usage of יהוה as the name of God. This word is used approximately 94 times and its meaning refers to God.<sup>1</sup> The Book of Proverbs is believed to have been created around 900 BC. During that time, people around King Solomon peaked in various ways, such as

through government, spirituality, politics, and culture. This book was created as a literary work aimed at educating the society to gain wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

Proverbs is a collection of wisdom that was initially brief (although some are longer, such as Proverbs 31:10-31) to summarize the basic values of Israelite society so that they can be easily remembered.<sup>3</sup> This collection is standard because most ancient Israelite wisdom was borrowed or recycled from neighboring Eastern countries. There is no consensus on the extent to which borrowing occurs. What is certain is that although much borrowing from surrounding countries took place, it was given a unique Hebrew touch: Yahwisized.<sup>4</sup>

According to LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, wise sayings in the Book of Proverbs are based on the sayings of a wise person in Israel.<sup>5</sup> These wise people seek to learn a wise life, namely, a good and quality life, and then teach it to their followers and young people. In his book "Root of Wisdom," Claus Westermann states that Israel's proverbs of wisdom (wisdom literature) originate from the oral sayings of a wise person who appeared in certain situations.

<sup>1</sup> David T Adamo, "The Concept of Monotheism in the Book of Proverbs and an African (Yoruba) Perspective," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (2022): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/VE.V43I1.2262>.

<sup>2</sup> Marudut Bernadtua Simanjuntak, "Representation of Wisdom in The Book of Proverbs Written by Solomon," *SELTICS* 3, no. 1 (June 14, 2020): 33-40, <https://doi.org/10.46918/SELTICS.V3I1.543>.

<sup>3</sup> Adamo, "The Concept of Monotheism in the Book of Proverbs and an African (Yoruba) Perspective."

<sup>4</sup> Adamo.

<sup>5</sup> W.S. Lasor, D.A. Hubbrad, and F.W. Bush, *Pengantar Perjanjian Lama 2: Sastra Dan Nubuat* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2011), 73-74.

These words are spoken and preserved because they are considered essential and have a fundamentally social function, namely, organizing life in a society in which writing culture is still underdeveloped.<sup>6</sup> This knowledge is gained by observing and experiencing oneself as a human being in society.<sup>7</sup> Observing and experiencing, a conclusion emerges, which is then reflected in proverbs.<sup>8</sup> There is general agreement among scholars that the wisdom depicted in the Book of Proverbs can be attained through mastery of life, that is, the wisdom of experience.<sup>9</sup>

Wisdom was first taught orally by wise people in classrooms set up for students.<sup>10</sup> These wise people continue to promote the importance of this wisdom in the development of human resources in their society. From this awareness, wisdom was socialized in each of the Israelite tribes; then, there was what has been called the wisdom movement.<sup>11</sup> This movement later produced wisdom literary writing in the form of proverbs.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Westermann, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Westermann, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Madipoane Masenya, "Wisdom from African Proverbs Meets Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature*, ed. Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2020), 34, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119158288.CH25>.

<sup>10</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume 4 Psalm*

Quoting William P. Brown, the teachings of wisdom in the Book of Proverbs describe character formation as a process.<sup>13</sup> This process takes us out of the world to bring us back into it, dismantling the old possibilities to reveal new ones.<sup>14</sup> Recurring motifs indicate this process of character formation through wisdom teachings, such as the "ways" of the wise or the "ways" of the wicked.<sup>15</sup> This description also concerns the things that will happen along that "road," a detour that provides many surprises and unexpected points that deconstruct old beliefs to reach new insights.<sup>16</sup>

Character formation in the Book of Proverbs begins with parental instructions, followed by discourses on wisdom as the youth moves out of the home and into the center of the commonplace in urban life. On the verge of adulthood, the silent son is ready to push himself into a larger social arena. Under these circumstances, the son is played with the sound of stupidity by a strange

*Proverbs* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 769.

<sup>11</sup> Lasor, Hubbrad, and Bush, *Pengantar Perjanjian Lama 2: Sastra Dan Nubuat*.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Balgarnie Young Scott, *The Anchor Bible Vol. 18, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Introduction* (Garden City, N. Y: Doubleday, 1973), xviii.

<sup>13</sup> William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 189.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, 134.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, 189.

<sup>16</sup> Brown.

woman. The son must decide on competing voices for allegiance. Will the son succeed according to the teachings of his parents and heed wisdom's words, or, like his friends meet his destruction through violence or sexual intercourse? Although Proverbs is not a narrative, a narrative-like resolution is provided in the book's last chapter. There is the profile of the strong woman (features of a mother who diligently provides for her household; 31:10-31). From a patriarchal perspective, she is an ideal spouse, a visionary object of miracles, and a person deeply rooted in the Temple economy.<sup>17</sup> The proverb starts with a quiet son, taught the duties of loyal familial and communal existence, and culminates with a grown man who has efficiently executed these obligations by securing a virtuous partner and taking his position among senior members of society.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding their role, as Westermann emphasized, most of the proverbs undeniably have vital importance in everyday life, even before the corpus of law was formed.<sup>19</sup> These proverbs were widely distributed and provided necessary guidance for personal and societal decision-making.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Brown, 65.

<sup>18</sup> Brown.

<sup>19</sup> Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Westermann.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Harun, *Martin Harun, Marilah, Makanlah Hidanganku...: Hikmat Israel Dalam Amsal, Ayub, Dan Pengkhotbah* (Jakarta: Lembaga Alkitab Indonesia, 2010), 22.

## Binary View

Women are a topic highlighted by a wise person in the book Proverbs. Martin Harun argues that there is an exciting connection between Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31, which is considered the frame of the whole book, namely that more than half of the verses contained in Proverbs 1-9 and the closing part of 31:10-31 talk about women.<sup>21</sup> Knut M. Heim expresses a more direct view. According to Heim, contrary to its image as a manuscript crafted by men for male readership, the Book of Proverbs contains many mentions of women and female figures, with a total of 219 verses, or 23.5% of the total material relating to women.<sup>22</sup>

In the Book of Proverbs, ladies are portrayed in three conventional ways: as mothers, spouses, and outsiders, or "non-familars." Unlike their depiction in other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, women in Proverbs are not shown as subjects of male dominance, but rather as a danger to men in general.<sup>23</sup> Jeanette May Hartwell states that the purpose of Proverbs for its first recipients was to develop wisdom and be able to distinguish it from folly, and concerning

<sup>22</sup> Knut M. Heim, "A Closer Look at the Pig in Proverbs Xi 22," *Vetus Testamentum* 58, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 13-27, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853308X246360>.

<sup>23</sup> Phyllis Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 57-60.

women, was to find a good woman who would give him honor instead of succumbing to the temptations of seductresses.<sup>24</sup>

The following aspect of women with virtuous personalities is that they are comfortable in both public and domestic realms and have the liberty to engage in any activity they desire. Conversely, the type of woman to steer clear of is portrayed as “uncivilized and foolish females.”<sup>25</sup> According to Hartwell, the representation of women in Proverbs is commonly interpreted within this dichotomous framework.<sup>26</sup>

### Reclaiming the Role of Women

In books of wisdom, including Proverbs, women are typically represented as good wives, loyal mothers, evil and smooth-tongued prostitutes, busy enslaved people, and controlled daughters. According to Carole R. Fontaine, this is a stereotypical portrayal of life constructed from a male perspective. Men act as moral agents and make various choices to replace women’s everyday life experiences. However, Fontaine also emphasizes that even though women’s voices are not visible, their presence can still echo under the text. From a determination and forward-looking perspective, we find that both men and women

have also played the role of wise people in various wisdom literature.

In her book, “Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs, and Performance in Biblical Wisdom,” Fontaine highlights the Israelite wisdom tradition where women play an active role. She used proverbs to investigate the textual relationship of women in the wisdom tradition and its practical implications in the real-life experiences of women. By looking at various sources, both writing and art, the reader is invited to imagine and see things from different perspectives to draw different conclusions. Using these approaches, she finds the social role of women as bearers of wisdom tradition.

One of Fontaine's key steps is to provide a broader definition of what constitutes a wise person. After thoroughly examining biblical texts, Fontaine concludes that wise people or teachers are practitioners or bearers of wisdom tradition. This wisdom tradition includes those who compose and copy wisdom books, as well as anyone who regularly performs tasks related to wisdom tradition, such as writing, giving advice, managing economic assets, resolving conflicts, teaching, mourning, and healing.<sup>27</sup> Fontaine states that wise people

---

<sup>24</sup> Jeanette May Hartwell, “Wisdom, Strange or Somewhere in Between: In Search of A Real Woman in The Book of Proverbs” (University of Birmingham, 2017), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Hartwell.

<sup>26</sup> Hartwell.

<sup>27</sup> Carole R. Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs, and Performance in Biblical Wisdom* (London & New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 14.

who are included in the wise category (writing and transmitting teachings in proverbs) include not only men but also women. Women are connected to the Israelite wisdom tradition as players who articulate, maintain, and give meaning to various proverbs and topics used in wisdom proverbs.<sup>28</sup> In other words, she emphasized that women are carriers of wisdom in their communities.

Fontaine is one of many experts to reach this conclusion. Other scholars, including M. V. Fox, Jeanette May Hartwell, Knut Heim, B.K. Waltke, Athalya Brenner, S. Amsler, and Whybray also have similar opinions that not only men but many women in the context of the Book of Proverbs are also wise people, sources of wisdom, or practitioners of wisdom. These women are called wise because of their ability to pass on knowledge, offer advice, and solve problems in their communities.

### **Women are the Wise Person in the Private Sphere**

According to wisdom, women in the private sphere are described both positively and negatively. In the image of being a wife and mother, women are seen positively (Prov. 10:1; 15:20; 23:25; 29:15). Women

also play an essential role in the continuation of their households. They can take care of the household, particularly regarding childcare, food, and clothing supplies, and manage the house staff. Women are required to take charge and execute significant and practical steps to benefit their kin. They assess, organize, and plan the adequacy of supplies and resources that can be used to meet household needs. They are respected for this role.<sup>29</sup> The things women do as mothers and wives are the qualifications they have as wise persons in the household, namely, economic managers in the domestic unit. The responsibilities of a mother or spouse extend beyond the household to encompass tasks such as procuring provisions from external sources, acquiring and disposing of real estate to enhance family wealth, selling excess goods from domestic operations, and so forth.<sup>30</sup>

Parents serve as both teachers and impart lessons in religion and moral ethics in the family, as commonly depicted in the book of Proverbs (10:1-22:16). Some scholars have suggested that fathers teach Proverbs to boys. Simultaneously, mothers were responsible for disciplining their daughters.<sup>31</sup> However, research such as that

---

<sup>28</sup> Fontaine.

<sup>29</sup> Fontaine, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Fontaine, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Georgy T. Khukhuni, Irina I. Valuitseva, and Yulia D. Budman, “‘Crying’ and ‘Children’ in Translations of the One Fragment of the Book of

Proverbs: Possible Interpretation or the Digression from the Original?,” *RUDN Journal of Language Studies, Semiotics and Semantics* 13, no. 2 (July 14, 2022): 323–36, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2299-2022-13-2-323-336>.

by Madipoane Masenya suggests that in ancient Israel, both parents were responsible for educating and raising their children. Although the specific roles of parents in education are not explicitly stated in the Proverbs, it can be inferred that both fathers and mothers were responsible for educating their children. The balance of parental responsibility is depicted in proverbs where a child's behavior is linked to both the father's happiness and the mother's sadness.<sup>32</sup>

The teachings of mothers are mentioned in Proverbs 1:8 and 6:20, and the term "Torat-hesed," or "Torah of goodness," is used in Proverbs 31:26 to describe the teachings of mothers, which may differ from those of fathers. Mothers play a significant role in educating young children and women as well as in housework. Even when a son becomes an adult, his mother remains a source of authority and wisdom.<sup>33</sup> Wisdom is depicted as a mother who wants to educate others in Proverbs 1:20, and the call for wisdom is like a mother who loves and cares for her children. Although the Old Testament is silent, mothers play a crucial

role in educating their children regarding moral, religious, and civic responsibilities. Along with fathers, mothers bear the responsibility of disciplining their children.<sup>34</sup> Mothers play a crucial role in educating their children in terms of their moral, religious, and civic responsibilities, although the Old Testament is silent on this aspect.<sup>35</sup> Along with fathers, mothers bear the responsibility of disciplining their children.<sup>36</sup>

Heim argues that mentions of mothers in the Book of Proverbs may pertain to women in general, and that their duties in household and educational settings are less rigidly outlined than previously assumed.<sup>37</sup> The setting for the teachings may not be limited to the home or the school, and the presence of mothers cannot be excluded or confirmed.<sup>38</sup> B. K. Waltke suggests that the reference to mothers in the prologue (1:8; 4:3; 6:20) serves as an example for other teachings. The relationship between women and the home provides a link to the teachings of mothers in 31:26.<sup>39</sup> According to Hartwell, the structure of chapters 1–9 does not exclude the physical presence of mo-

<sup>32</sup> Masenya, "Wisdom from African Proverbs Meets Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs," 474.

<sup>33</sup> Simanjuntak, "Representation of Wisdom in The Book of Proverbs Written by Solomon."

<sup>34</sup> Simanjuntak.

<sup>35</sup> M.V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 82.

<sup>36</sup> Hartwell, "Wisdom, Strange or Somewhere in Between: In Search of A Real Woman in The Book of Proverbs," 202.

<sup>37</sup> Heim, "A Closer Look at the Pig in Proverbs Xi 22."

<sup>38</sup> Hartwell, "Wisdom, Strange or Somewhere in Between: In Search of A Real Woman in The Book of Proverbs," 161.

<sup>39</sup> B.K. Walke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 117.



thers. The language in word pairs weakens the idea that only fathers speak in the opening chapters.<sup>40</sup> Athalya Brenner sees Proverbs 31:10–31 as a “teaching mothers to daughters” genre, which is a reverse and appendix to the “mothers teaching to sons” convention found in chapters 1-9 and the first part of chapter 31.<sup>41</sup> The role of mothers in teaching and counseling can provide a unique perspective in resolving conflicts and managing family members. While some may view the cunning actions portrayed by wives and mothers in biblical tradition with distrust, it is essential to recognize that such actions are a common tactic employed by individuals who lack direct control.<sup>42</sup>

Women are valued as advisors in Israel. According to Fontaine, in the narratives found in Scripture, spouses who disregard the counsel of their wives, such as Job and Nabal, are consistently met with consequences (Job) or vanish from the narrative entirely (Nabal). Evidence from outside of Israel suggests that women also serve as counselors to their children, such as interpreting dreams, as seen in the examples of Joseph and Daniel. The ability to interpret dreams was considered a hallmark of wis-

dom, and many wise people attempted to interpret the king’s dream before Joseph and Daniel succeeded. In the ancient world, dreams were considered to have a tangible impact on one’s path. And in the Old Testament, dreams were seen as simple messages from God, except in the case of Jeremiah 29:8, where dreams and dream interpreters were viewed as bad.

As analyzed by Whybray, Amsler asserts that women are the centerpiece of Proverbs, especially as sage advisors who guide men. According to Amsler, the women in Proverbs assert their right to voice their opinions and wield them with significant impact. Other roles associated with wisdom played by women in Proverbs included healer and mourner. Women were responsible for caring for sick family members, such as Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, and were taught nursing skills as part of their education. Women also served as mourners and could use this role to achieve their goals, as seen in the cases of the wise woman in 2 Samuel 14:2 and the harlot in 1 Kings 3:18-19.

Enslaved women were also considered wise people in Proverbs, and there were three types of slaves in Proverbs: those

---

<sup>40</sup> Hartwell, “Wisdom, Strange or Somewhere in Between: In Search of A Real Woman in The Book of Proverbs,” 170.

<sup>41</sup> Athalya Brenner and F. van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the*

*Hebrew Bible* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 1996), 127-28.

<sup>42</sup> Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs, and Performance in Biblical Wisdom*, 34.

belonging to a wise woman, those working in the household, and maids who provided sexual services. The women who served the wise woman may have also been seen as serving wisdom as a personal goddess in cultic capacities. This was similar to other religious sects in the ancient Near East, where women of elevated standing dedicated their lives to serving a specific deity. In Anatolia, enslaved women were documented as “wise women” and acted as informants who recited ritualistic scripts for preservation. Enslaved women in Israel also knew, as seen in the story of Naaman’s healing in 2 Kings 5, where the information was passed on by an Israelite female captive enslaved person serving Naaman’s wife.

### **Women are the Wise person in the Public Sphere**

Even in the public sphere, the role of women as the wise person can be found. Fontaine maintains that in the public sphere, women are the unofficial writers and sages.<sup>43</sup> It is said to be unofficial because the official writers and sages were men. However, the post-exile period allowed for more significant opportunities for women to enter the realm of wisdom.<sup>44</sup> In the proverb, it is stated that their prowess is a rival for

men. In Canaan, for example, during the time of the judges, an excellent example is Gideon, who approached a young woman to write down names (Judg. 8:14). This writer is an ordinary person and not a professional writer. She was an ordinary literate person, so it could be said that women, especially those dealing with keeping household records, were also literate.

Fontaine traced that in Egypt and Mesopotamia, women were clerks in the palace. Some of them compose poems or songs. Eunice Poethig has demonstrated that women were the creators and preservers of Israelite victory songs and traditions by examining traditional transmission methods and analyzing terms related to women and female choirs in the tradition.<sup>45</sup> Hartwell asserts that women were found not only in Jewish public life groups through their victory songs but also as individual women, in the form of wise women. This expertise was evident through innate abilities, characteristics, and leadership training among women and, sometimes, society at large.<sup>46</sup> It was the wise woman who looked after her community and whose counsel was sought by not only her family but the entire community. She was proficient in the craft practiced in her community, and she

---

<sup>43</sup> Fontaine, 51.

<sup>44</sup> Fontaine, 52.

<sup>45</sup> E.B. Poethig, *The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel* (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1985), 220.

<sup>46</sup> Hartwell, “Wisdom, Strange or Somewhere in Between: In Search of A Real Woman in The Book of Proverbs,” 93.

was also the poet who sang at weddings and other celebratory events, as well as at mourning.<sup>47</sup>

Hartwell notes that the wise woman could also be found engaging with an army commander and all the people (2 Sam. 20:14-22), soothing a king (2 Sam. 14), and advising entire nations as the mother in Israel (Judges 5:7).<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, the wise woman who comforted King David was instructed to recite the words given to her by Joab (2 Sam. 14:3). Despite not speaking any words of wisdom herself, she was still recognized and known outside her community as a wise woman (2 Sam. 14:2).<sup>49</sup>

According to Fontaine, it's possible that women with wisdom could have played a role in preserving and passing down folk proverbs that are included in the Book of Proverbs. Courtiers likely crafted these two-line sayings, but mothers were responsible for educating their families, and proverbs were essential for transmitting knowledge in traditional societies. So, it is plausible to assume that women utilized proverbs, even if they did not personally write them.<sup>50</sup>

Fontaine explained that what is referred to as stupidity in proverbs applied to

women is related to their sexuality, which is not in the power of men. In contrast, stupid men cannot be trusted in all matters and can cause disaster. The story of Abigail, who managed to save her family from Nabal's stupidity by meeting David with kind words and giving gifts without Nabal's knowledge, seems to be realized in Proverbs 14:1. A composition belonging to or written by a woman is found in Proverbs 31:1-9 which is an instruction from the queen mother to her son, Lemuel. He acts as an authority, just like a man who instructs his children. Here Lemuel's mother played the role of a royal adviser. Things like this can be found in cultures outside of Israel.

In the Old Testament, the role of the queen mother as an adviser to the king is often expressed, even though the expression according to the editor or writer of the Bible is negative. However, they act with authority and use their ability to speak cleverly/wisely to achieve their goals. The accounts of royal women who were seen as malicious or corrupt include Maacah, the mother of Asa, who was dismissed from her role by her son due to her lousy influence (1 Kings 15:9-14), and Athaliah, who advised Ahaziah in evil deeds (2 Chron. 22:2-4).

---

<sup>47</sup> S.D. Goitein and M. Carasik, "Women as Creators of Biblical Genres," *Prooftexts* 8, no. 1 (1988): 1-33, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20689197>.

<sup>48</sup> Hartwell, "Wisdom, Strange or Somewhere in Between: In Search of A Real Woman in The Book of Proverbs," 94.

<sup>49</sup> Hartwell.

<sup>50</sup> Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs, and Performance in Biblical Wisdom*, 57.

Including these women's actions in court records indicates that some women wielded significant power in court circles.<sup>51</sup> Depictions of excellent and evil queens or queen mothers can be seen in the life story of Bathsheba.

As well as being an unofficial writer and sage, Fontaine states that one of the essential roles of women is that of the counselor. The role of women as counselors in conflict resolution is, for example, in 2 Samuel 14:14–20.<sup>52</sup> Another role is as a healer. In traditional settings, women who serve as healers are not considered professionals or scientifically trained doctors. Instead, their roles encompass those of traditional healers, nurses, and lay midwives, which require a combination of training and innate common sense. Being a wife and mother often involves caring for sick family members, including serving as a healer and nurse.<sup>53</sup> With the divine model that institutionalized the role and function of midwives, it is not surprising that their word and deed are held in high esteem, and this can be a source of fear for the powerful men in their social world. Although there are limited references to wise female healers in the Hebrew Bible, some suggestive hints

suggest women continued to play a role in the realm of folk wisdom as healers. The midwife appears in Genesis 35:17 and 38:28 and is crucial in playing the Pharaoh in Exodus from Egypt.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from the role of wise women, as explained above, women generally are practitioners who can be categorized as wise people. Fontaine describes the roots of women's wisdom in forming social life and their natural innateness. Women, in general, do various things related to the continuity of life in the household. Women have knowledge and skills related to their biological conditions, such as knowing the fertile period, pregnancy, giving birth, breastfeeding, and caring for children. In their role of managing and caring for all family members, women know the importance of maintaining the whole family's health. Knowledge about the types of flora and fauna that have particular properties is beneficial for healing disease. Women are stewards of the world, cleaning up the bodily wastes of babies, children, and other women in their reproductive cycle, their reproductive blood, and dealing with care after death.<sup>55</sup> Fontaine stated that it is no coincidence that many Bible verses mention women's health

---

<sup>51</sup> Hartwell, "Wisdom, Strange or Somewhere in Between: In Search of A Real Woman in The Book of Proverbs," 96-97.

<sup>52</sup> Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs, and Performance in Biblical Wisdom*, 65.

<sup>53</sup> Fontaine, 71.

<sup>54</sup> Fontaine, 74.

<sup>55</sup> Fontaine, 78.

activities or healing features and that the family context is a critical component of society. According to Fontaine, there is also a role for women in several discussions of healing with herbs (hyssop and oil).<sup>56</sup>

### **The Alpha Woman: Representation of Women as Wise Persons in Negative Roles**

The negative image of women in Proverbs is found in a group that leads to the term “strange woman.” This group is made up of a wayward woman (2:16; 5:20; 22:4), a bitch (7:8; 7:10), an immoral woman (11:22), an adulterous woman (30:20), a strange woman (2:16; 5:20), and an evil woman (6:24). The image of these women is expressed in terms that show that they are individuals who commit sexual deviance, which is behavior that harms group standards regarding ethnicity, heritage customs, and sexual conventions.<sup>57</sup> According to Sinulingga, Israeli women who have such behavior or work as prostitutes are considered, referred to, and treated as strange women.<sup>58</sup> The sexual behavior of this group of so-called strange women is associated with them as carriers of influence to worship other gods besides the God of Israel. In

worshipping fertility gods, some women are referred to as filial prostitutes. They devote their sexuality to the ritual of prayer.<sup>59</sup> In the act, filial prostitutes have sexual relations with worshippers who come to their holy places.<sup>60</sup>

This group of women’s sexual behavior is closely related to his words, as evidenced by the slickness of his words (2:16; 5:3; 7:5; 23:27), the mouth (22:14), and the cunning of strange women’s tongue (6:24). Sexually accepted. Still, negatively portrayed female behavior is that of a grumpy, quarrelsome wife (19:13; 21:19; 27:15). Such depictions are dangerous because they go against the expectations of patriarchal societies. As Fontaine explains, these negative portrayals are often a result of the fact that these women do not support men or are beyond their control.<sup>61</sup> Although they are portrayed negatively, they act as subjects. These women have linguistic skills. Despite being viewed as negative traits, seduction, rage, and argument are alternative paths that could lead to success and access to power.

There is indirect references to the role of widows in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 15:25 speaks of the widow’s possession of land. The negative picture of the

<sup>56</sup> Fontaine, 79.

<sup>57</sup> Fontaine, 42.

<sup>58</sup> Risnawati Sinulingga, *Tafsiran Alkitab Kitab Amsal 1-9* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2015), 167.

<sup>59</sup> Gail Corrington Streete, *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 51.

<sup>60</sup> Streete.

<sup>61</sup> Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs, and Performance in Biblical Wisdom*, 40.

widow relates to the loss of her husband and the protections he provided.<sup>62</sup> However, the patriarchal societal structure persists, as women had to own land, run households, and raise children without the help of men, which was seen as complex and undesirable. The fear of alienation from inheritance also added to the financial problems faced by women in the community.

This negative portrayal of the “strange woman” and her linguistic skills have been overcome by placing the female character in the poetry of a capable wife. The book of Proverbs closes with a poem about a capable wife, who in Hebrew is called *eshet khayil* אִשֶׁת חַיִל. The only woman in the Old Testament mentioned as *esyet khayil* is Ruth (3:11), a strange woman. By looking at the arrangement of the books in the Hebrew canon that the Book of Ruth is placed after the book of Proverbs, it can be said that Ruth is the woman referred to as a picture of a strange woman, a capable woman.

In the early Christian period, many Christian women, especially girls, and widows, embraced the holy life offered by the new religion, free from male control.<sup>63</sup> Adulterers, prostitutes, harlots, and foolish women, who are seen as sexually indecent, are considered unacceptable in male socie-

ty. They are considered the opposite of the trustworthy spouse and nurturing parent and are referred to as “Strange Women.”<sup>64</sup> The portrayal of adulterers in the teachings given to children serves as a warning and a temptation to men, women, and husbands whose behavior may not be adequate. On the other hand, good wives and mothers, whose sexuality is considered appropriate and under the control of men, are seen as life-bringers.<sup>65</sup> In contrast, adulterers, bad women, and stupid women are depicted as the evil twins of the Wise Woman. Women with appropriate roles in the household, such as a wife, mothers, sisters, or aunts, are seen as “flowing water,” which symbolizes life but is still dangerous because of its fluidity.

From the above, women depicted in negative roles, such as nagging wives, widows, adulterers, prostitutes, and haughty slaves, are also doers of wisdom. These women had abilities and used these abilities to follow their standards and goals, which often contradicted the roles accepted by men in patriarchal societies of the time. Images of women’s roles are portrayed negatively in the book of Proverbs because they are neither supportive nor under the control of men. They own and use their abilities. The author believes that the “abnormal and sub-

<sup>62</sup> Fontaine.

<sup>63</sup> Fontaine, 41.

<sup>64</sup> Fontaine, 42.

<sup>65</sup> Fontaine, 46.

versive” women understood by Fontaine and other scholars as wise women with this negative picture were alpha, the kind of tough women of their time. This metaphor of alpha females fits perfectly with the similarity of their characteristics. This category of “alpha women” is a well-known one in the world of psychology and points to the character of women who are independent, brave, challenging, and talented leaders. These women preferred being treated as subjects rather than “women.” They preferred independence and “stood on their own feet,” had no feelings of inferiority, and generally did not care about concessions that implied they were inferior or weak or needed special attention.<sup>66</sup> Another term that refers to women with similar characteristics is the dominant female. Abraham Maslow (1939) specifically described the characteristics of dominant women. According to Maslow, dominant women rarely feel depressed, have great self-confidence, and have higher composure. Maslow also asserts that these women with high dominance will usually be great leaders.<sup>67</sup> Monika K. Sumra states, although not explicitly stated, that given the current idea of alpha wo-

men, one could easily extrapolate Maslow’s “dominant woman” into an “alpha woman.”<sup>68</sup>

Interestingly, despite the high chance of becoming great leaders, these alpha women are vulnerable to negative labels and stereotypes. In studies by scholars, it was discovered that these alpha women were often dubbed ambitious, stubborn, annoying, feminazi, bitches, and even “penis eaters.”<sup>69</sup> The advantages and consequences borne by these alpha women parallel the description of wise women in the negative picture in these Proverbs texts.

For this reason, the use of the metaphor of alpha women as an umbrella term for wise women in this negative picture in the Book of Proverbs, according to the author, is a proposal relevant to the agenda of liberating interpretation. Through the imposition of the new metaphor, the more prominent image of wise women with this negative image is that they are independent, difficult to subdue, dominant, and have extraordinary diplomatic abilities. They are women of strong character and wisdom. In a social context that upholds the domestication of women as a regular order,

---

<sup>66</sup> Rose Marie Ward, Donald G. DiPaolo, and Halle C. Popson, “College Student Leaders: Meet the Alpha Female,” *Journal of Leadership Education* 7, no. 3 (2009): 100–117, <https://doi.org/10.12806/V7/I3/RF2>.

<sup>67</sup> Monika K. Sumra, “Masculinity, Femininity, and Leadership: Taking a Closer Look at the Alpha

Female,” *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 4 (April 1, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1371/JOURNAL.PONE.0215181>.

<sup>68</sup> Sumra.

<sup>69</sup> Ward, DiPaolo, and Popson, “College Student Leaders: Meet the Alpha Female.”

these alpha women choose to refuse to submit and commit acts of disobedience along the way.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the studies conducted by scholars, it is concluded that women in the book of Proverbs play a crucial role alongside men as sources of wisdom. Women are regarded as wise individuals and significantly impact the home's upkeep, such as managing the household, making decisions, and providing education about religion and moral ethics. Women also have a significant role in the public sphere as writers, wise people, scribes, song composers, leaders in their communities, and providers of advice sought by society at large. Even in negative portrayals, their presence as wise individuals cannot be denied. The negative portrayal of women's roles occurs because women have the ability. They use that ability according to their standards and goals, which often conflict with the roles assigned to women in the patriarchal society at that time. Thus, this negative role should not be seen as a nasty action of the women themselves but as part of the religious-social dynamics that were their context at the time.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author expresses her gratitude to Idrus Sasirais for his assistance in improving this article. He eliminated unnecessary

data and edited a few sentences to make them easier to understand. Furthermore, he adjusted the writing structure and citation system to meet the requirements of the journal. The author acknowledges that this article is a collaboration with Idrus Sasirais.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adamo, David T. "The Concept of Monotheism in the Book of Proverbs and an African (Yoruba) Perspective." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (2022): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/VE.V43I1.2262>.
- Bird, Phyllis. "Images of Women in the Old Testament." In *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974.
- Brenner, Athalya, and F. van Dijk-Hemmes. *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*. Leiden & Boston: Brill, 1996.
- Brown, William P. *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.
- Buttrick, George Arthur. *The Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume 4 Psalm Proverbs*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995.
- Fontaine, Carole R. *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs, and Performance in Biblical Wisdom*. London & New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.
- Fox, M.V. *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.



- Goitein, S.D., and M. Carasik. "Women as Creators of Biblical Genres." *Prooftexts* 8, no. 1 (1988): 1–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20689197>.
- Hartwell, Jeanette May. "Wisdom, Strange or Somewhere in Between: In Search of A Real Woman in The Book of Proverbs." University of Birmingham, 2017.
- Harun, Martin. *Martin Harun, Marilah, Makanlah Hidanganku...: Hikmat Israel Dalam Amsal, Ayub, Dan Pengkhotbah*. Jakarta: Lembaga Alkitab Indonesia, 2010.
- Heim, Knut M. "A Closer Look at the Pig in Proverbs Xi 22." *Vetus Testamentum* 58, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 13–27. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853308X246360>.
- Khukhuni, Georgy T., Irina I. Valuitseva, and Yulia D. Budman. "'Crying' and 'Children' in Translations of the One Fragment of the Book of Proverbs: Possible Interpretation or the Digression from the Original?" *RUDN Journal of Language Studies, Semiotics and Semantics* 13, no. 2 (July 14, 2022): 323–36. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2299-2022-13-2-323-336>.
- Lasor, W.S., D.A. Hubbrad, and F.W. Bush. *Pengantar Perjanjian Lama 2: Sastra Dan Nubuat*. Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2011.
- Masenya, Madipoane. "Wisdom from African Proverbs Meets Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature*, edited by Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119158288.CH25>.
- Poethig, E.B. *The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel*. New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1985.
- Scott, Robert Balgarnie Young. *The Anchor Bible Vol. 18, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Introduction*. Garden City, N. Y: Doubleday, 1973.
- Simanjuntak, Marudut Bernadtua. "Representation of Wisdom in The Book of Proverbs Written by Solomon." *SELTICS* 3, no. 1 (June 14, 2020): 33–40. <https://doi.org/10.46918/SELTICS.V3I1.543>.
- Sinulingga, Risnawati. *Tafsiran Alkitab Kitab Amsal 1-9*. Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2015.
- Streete, Gail Corrington. *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.
- Sumra, Monika K. "Masculinity, Femininity, and Leadership: Taking a Closer Look at the Alpha Female." *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 4 (April 1, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1371/JOURNAL.PONE.0215181>.
- Walke, B.K. *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 2004.
- Ward, Rose Marie, Donald G. DiPaolo, and Halle C. Popson. "College Student Leaders: Meet the Alpha Female." *Journal of Leadership Education* 7, no. 3 (2009): 100–117. <https://doi.org/10.12806/V7/I3/RF2>.
- Westermann, Claus. *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.