

Feeling Womb-ey:

The Presence and Significance of Emotion in Proverbs 31:1-9

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Abstract

In recent years a selection of scholars has examined emotion in the Bible, yet considerations of gender and emotion remain largely unexplored. Prov. 31:1–9 serves as fitting text for such exploration due to its rare female speaker evidencing multiple signals of emotion. This article explores the presence and significance of emotion in Prov. 31:1–9, with special attention to gender and power dynamics at play. It identifies topical, syntactic, and semantic indicators, arguing that mention of *biṭnî* (“my womb”) serves as a conceptual metaphor of emotion deriving from the *in utero* connection experienced between the poem’s two main figures, a royal mother and son. As a conceptual metaphor of emotion, *biṭnî* connects with a second reference to the body, *pəṭah-pîkâ* (“open your mouth”), to promote societal interdependence that legitimates class hierarchy. The article explores the rhetorical effect of these two maternal references upon the mother’s ethical council and upon readers, arguing that her urging of her son to imitate her maternal care with respect to his own charges can be critiqued for elevating the interests of the ruling class via silencing those who are controlled by them. The present study, then, models how attending to emotion not only impacts interpretation but also empowers readers to interrogate the feelings such texts provoke, becoming more savvy as regards embrace of a text and its focalized figures.

Keywords: Proverbs 31, emotion, gender, affect, feminist interpretation

Proverbs 31:1–9

1. The words of Lemuel, a king, the burden with which she rebuked him, his mother:
2. “What, my son—and what?! son of my womb; and what—? Son of my vows?!”
3. Do not give to women your strength, or your ways to devourers of kings.”
4. “Not for kings, Lemuel, not for kings the drinking of wine, or for princes, beer.
5. ... Lest he should drink and forget the decrees and change the verdict of the sons of oppression.”
6. “ ‘Give beer to the perishing,
and wine to the bitter of soul’ —
7. Let him drink and forget his poverty;
let him not remember his toil anymore.”

8. “Open your mouth for the speechless,
on behalf of all who are perishing.
9. Open your mouth — judge rightly!
Plead the case of the poor and oppressed.”

... *What?! Son of my womb?!* (Prov. 31:2). Paul Kruger’s essay on emotions and the Hebrew Bible asserts that “no trace is found of women getting angry” (2015, 415). Yet have we that trace here, in Proverbs 31? Or is Lemuel’s mother not angry, but aggravated, perhaps, or afraid? She says: *What, my son—and what?! Son of my womb; and what—? Son of my vows?!* (v. 2). Several commentators (Fox, Yoder, Kirk-Duggan) infer crisis in Prov. 31:1–9, yet so far no detailed analysis of accompanying emotion exists. This oversight needs remedy, not only to enhance the poem’s appeal to readers and fill out its meaning, but also to increase understanding of how emotion is represented and functions in biblical texts.

In recent years a selection of scholars have undertaken such work, noting the pervasiveness of emotion in the Bible, its purpose in depicting the nature of God as well as the perceptions and values of biblical authors and characters (Schlimm 2017). Scholars such as Kruger, Matthew Schlimm, and Françoise Mirguet have labored to identify how emotion in the Bible differs from contemporary understandings in the ways that emotions are triggered, experienced, and expressed. Among matters still needing attention, Kruger identifies several related to emotion and gender. Does the Bible correlate certain emotions to certain genders? Does it associate emotionality in general with one gender over another? Does it ascribe one collection of emotions to males while proscribing those same emotions in females (and vice versa)? Prov. 31:1–9 serves as fitting text for examining emotion and gender due to its rare female speaker evidencing multiple signals of emotion. Even more, it deserves attention for invoking the womb, a female reproductive organ. This article explores the presence and significance of emotion in Prov. 31:1–9, with special attention to gender and power dynamics at play between royal mother and son. After defining emotion and distinguishing between contemporary and ancient expressions of emotion, it uses Christine Yoder’s essay on emotion in Proverbs 1-9 as springboard to identify topical, syntactic, and semantic indicators of emotion, arguing that mention of *biṭnî* (“my womb”) serves as a conceptual metaphor of emotion deriving from the *in utero* connection experienced between the poem’s two main figures, a royal mother and son. As a conceptual metaphor of emotion, *biṭnî* connects with a second reference to the body, *pətaḥ-pîkâ* (“open your mouth”), to promote societal interdependence that legitimates class hierarchy. The article explores the rhetorical effect of these two maternal references upon the mother’s ethical council and upon readers, arguing that her urging of her son to imitate her maternal care with respect to his own charges can be critiqued for elevating the interests of the ruling class via silencing those who are controlled by them. The present study, then, models how attending to emotion not only affects interpretation

but also empowers readers to interrogate the feelings such texts provoke, becoming more savvy as regards embrace of a text and its focalized figures.

Defining Emotion

Emotions are difficult to define or analyze, and diverse theories exist explaining what they are. Patrick Hogan breaks down an emotional experience as, first, stimulated by certain eliciting conditions—“the situations, occurrences, and properties to which we are sensitive in emotional experience and that serve to activate emotion systems” (2011, 2–3). These activate expressive outcomes in the body—perhaps vocalizations, facial gestures, postural changes, perspiration. Then a reaction occurs, intended to either maintain or attain a desirable state. All this is accompanied by the actual feeling of the emotion. Bodily responses of emotion can become eliciting conditions in others, passing on to them either the same or alternative reactive emotions (Hogan, 2011, 3).

Jenefer Robinson offers this description:

When human beings have an emotional response to something in the (internal or external) environment, they make an automatic affective appraisal that picks that thing out as significant to them (given their wants, goals, and interests) and requiring attention. This affective appraisal causes physiological changes, tendencies to act, and expressive gestures, including characteristic facial and vocal expressions, which may be subjectively experienced as feelings, and the whole process is then modified by cognitive monitoring (2010, 72).

Both Hogan’s and Robinson’s descriptions reflect scholars’ increasing recognition of the connection between mind and body (cognition and emotion)—not dualities, as has traditionally been conceived, but participating together in one system of environmental awareness and response. A related field of inquiry, affect studies, also highlights the role of the body in perception and will be useful for exploring the presence and significance of emotion in Proverbs 31:1–9.

There is some overlap in these two concepts, emotion and affect. Frequently the term affect is used when describing or discussing emotion, as in Robinson’s mention above. Yet affect theorists commonly define affect as distinct from emotion or feelings. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg explain that “[a]ffect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion” (2010, 1). To help readers identify affect, Karen Bray and Stephen Moore advise thinking of a mountain high, a “disquiet” before knowing what’s wrong, or that “tingle of expectation, before a first kiss” (2020, 2). There is also decided emphasis on the social in affect studies. Fiona Black and Jennifer Koosed state, “Affect is not just about individual and interior emotional states but always also about how emotion is a socially produced sensation, affects circulate body to body, produced by and producing certain political and cultural phenomena” (2019, 9). Myriad approaches and priorities exist within affect studies; what is useful for this

analysis of Prov. 31:1–9 are those notions of affect recognizing what exists as a type of intensified emotion, a pre-conscious, highly transmissible bodily activity that informs as to power relations in cultures and communities. In light of their considerable overlap, for the purposes of this paper, at times the terms emotion and affect will be used interchangeably.

Emotions Across Cultures

As alluded above, scholars caution that the expression of emotion in biblical texts differs from contemporary practice. According to Mirguet, there can be no strict equivalents. Modern English-speaking cultures largely conceive emotions as isolated experiences communicated via vocabulary that isolates abstract and individualistic feelings (*happy, sad, excited*, and so on) (2016, 443). In the Bible, emotions must often be inferred—a feature of biblical style that can heighten suspense, as in the dialogue between Isaac and Abraham when ascending Mt. Moriah (Gen. 22:7-8: *“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together*). In addition, words in biblical Hebrew that are commonly translated with English words reflecting emotion overlap in their original meaning with associated *actions* (Mirguet 2016, 448). For example, *ahav* (“love”) can include the obligation to act on behalf of another based on political, and not just affective, dynamics. Hence comparisons exist to Near Eastern treatises for texts such as Josh. 22:5 (*Be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul*).¹ Also, *shanah* (“hate”) consists not just of a feeling but a bodily repulsion (2 Sam. 13:15: *Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, “Get up and get out!”*) or abandonment (Isa. 60:15: *Although you have been forsaken and hated, with no one traveling through ...*) (Mirguet 2016, 450). Finally, in biblical texts, experiences likely involving emotion, rather than naming such, often describe actions within a social context. For example, readers perceive Jacob’s anguish upon hearing of his son Joseph’s death through the tearing of his garment, putting on sackcloth, and mourning many days (Gen. 37:33–35). So also David grieves Absalom’s death (2 Sam. 19:1-3), Job, his misfortunes (Job:1:20), and Tamar, her rape (2 Sam. 13:19–20) (Mirguet 2016, 453).

Alec Basson has identified instances of emotion communicated through conceptual metaphors that are “grounded in embodied experience” (2009, 122). As he explains, a conceptual metaphor functions to express an abstract concept (such as an emotion) by transferring “information and thought structures from the source domain ... to the target domain” (122). Multiple conceptual metaphors for emotion

¹ See also Lev. 19:18, Deut. 6:5, 10:12, 10:19, Josh. 23:11.

based upon parts of the body exist in biblical texts. For example, anger is depicted as a snorting nose, which is a physiological change that occurs during or as part of the experience of that emotion (2 Sam. 12:5). Shame is communicated through bowed heads (Job 10:15), defiance through stiff necks (Deut. 9:6), joy through shining face and eyes (Job 29:24, Prov. 15:30), grief through weeping eyes and fermented guts (Lam. 2:11), and fear through shaking loins (Isa. 21:3) or failing bowels and bladder (Josh. 7:5, Ps. 22:15).

Despite the differences of time and culture, in considering emotion in Proverbs 31:1–9, I assume a certain universality of emotional experience. Conceiving and expressing emotion do vary across cultures, yet rooting analysis of emotional expression in physiology validates assuming enough consistency of experience and expression to meaningfully engage in present-day examination of emotion in ancient texts (Basson 2009, 123).² We all experience emotions, transmit them, and become attached to texts via emotional resonance.³ So writes Karl Allen Kuhn: “Affective appeal in varying forms is the means by which narratives compel us to enter their storied world and entertain out the version of reality they present” (2009, 4). Prov. 31:1–9, a poem, a wisdom instruction, is narrative-like, with characters and drama, drawing us into their world, including its emotional realm.

Emotions in Proverbs

Christine Roy Yoder, in her essay “The Objects of Our Affections: Emotions and the Moral Life in Proverbs 1–9,” corrects a previous view promoted by scholars about emotion in Proverbs as prioritizing self-restraint. Proverbs does not reject emotion as “irrational impulses or animalistic energies” (2005, 74), Yoder writes, but values them as forms of perception regarding a person’s beliefs and values; they are “constitutive elements of character” (2005, 74). According to Yoder, Proverbs is replete with emotion, concerned toward directing its audience to channel them toward objects appropriate to a moral life and human flourishing. Several times Proverbs 1–9 associates emotion with bodily appetites, both positively and negatively, and criticizes fools as directing their emotions toward wrong objects.

As is commonly acknowledged, chapters 1–9 and 31 of Proverbs together form bookends to the collection of proverbs sayings and poems within. They both contain prominent female speakers who proclaim wisdom (1:20, 6:20, 8:3, 31:26). They possess common vocabulary and themes, including urging the heeding of parental instruction (1:8, 4:1; 31:1–2), promoting wisdom and fear of the Lord (1:7; 31:30), hard work (6:9; 31:15), and avoiding unsavory women (2:16, 5:3; 31:3). Given the

² Basson cites Kovecses to assert the “universality that arises from the physiology of the human body” (2009, 123). See also Kuhn 2009, 25, and Hogan 2011, 13, contra Cottrill 2014, 431–432.

³ As Hogan illustrates, “If I am out on a dark night in the woods and my companion gasps in fear, I will feel fear—a parallel emotion triggered by my companion’s emotion expression. When I meet a stranger in a dark alley and he looks at me with anger, I am also likely to feel fear, but in this case the fear will be a complementary emotion triggered by the expression of anger. Our emotional response to emotional expressions appears to be largely innate” (2011, 3).

relationship between chapters 1–9 and chapter 31, Yoder’s work on chapters 1–9 can inform and direct examination of emotion in Proverbs 31. How does its presence compare? Who is expressing emotion, how, and toward what objects and ends? Is the manner consistent with that of chapters 1–9, or different? What significance can be drawn from any differences? Let’s dig in.

Emotional Subjects

The words of Lemuel, a king, the burden⁴ with which she rebuked⁵ him, his mother (Prov. 31:1). As set forth in Prov. 31:1, Lemuel, a king, recalls an admonition spoken by his mother. These are the two main characters within the text potentially experiencing emotion. Interestingly, the multileveled presence of Lemuel as both recaller of his mother’s words spoken in the past and the object to whom the mother directs her words as they are spoken opens up possibilities for his emotional experience in two frames: as the one rebuked and the one remembering rebuke. Additional potential subjects of emotion in vv. 1–9 include the women of v. 3 and the suffering poor of vv. 5–9. Outside the text, readers (or hearers) are potentially affected emotionally as they infer the emotions of characters in the text and empathetically experience those same emotions, or as they recognize a situation within the text as forming their own eliciting condition for emotion.

As initial speaker of this rebuke, Lemuel’s mother offers the most signifiers of emotion. Her very act of confrontation can be assumed as accompanied by such, since it initiates conflict, risks alienation, retaliation, and so on. Such possibilities constitute eliciting conditions that trigger emotion. The events insinuated via her words, also, quite typically stir emotion: a son engaged in sexual licentiousness (v. 3), excessive drinking (v. 4), and dereliction of duty (v. 5). Without knowing exactly what has prompted her, we can assume a mother, invested in her son’s success, committed to his making right choices, would have experienced a host of emotions triggering her words.

Additionally, note this mother’s vocabulary and syntax, with repetition: the three-fold “*mah-... mah-... mah-*” (v. 2), which translate, “What ... what ... what?!” Or as some render, “no! ... No! ... NO!” (Fox 2009, 882). Readers must imagine how tone and inflection change across the repetition but can easily infer a crescendo of intensifying emotion expressed via this pattern. Multiple imperatives (‘*al* (thrice), *tə-nū*, *pə-tah* (twice), and *wə-dîn*) add force to her words. Throughout the verses of Prov. 31:1–9, self-interruption occurs, signaled by abrupt shifts in topic, as when this speaking mother moves from correcting her son’s company with women to his excessive drinking (vv. 3–4), and then from her son drinking to poor people drinking

⁴ Disagreement exists concerning translation of this line, with many understanding *maš-šā* not as burden or oracle but as a geographic location. See Fox 2009 for explanation of the arguments. I find convincing Fox’s argument against geographic location based on grammar, and in addition, in light of the term’s mention also in Prov. 30.

⁵ Often translated, “taught.” HALOT includes “chastise, rebuke” among meanings (Koehler et al 1994–2000, 418).

(vv. 4–7) and then from the poor drinking to her son’s obligation to enact justice (vv. 8–9). In the midst of this is inserted a likely communal proverb, as if to bolster the speaker’s view: “*Give beer to the perishing, and wine to the bitter of soul*”—” (v. 6). It all contributes to the impression of emotional outburst.

Such style resembles the emotionality of Proverbs 1–9’s Lady Wisdom, who speaks emotionally about personal topics, her syntax full of “sharp, staccato sounds (k,b,p,s)” (Yoder 2005, 77). Compare also to Reuben’s stuttering in Gen. 37:30b, when he realizes that against his wishes his brothers have sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt: *hay·ye·led ’ê ·nen·nū, wa·’ă ·nî ’ā ·nāh ’ă ·nî- bā*. Mirguet writes similarly about the style of David’s lament over Absalom in 2 Sam. 19:4 (*bə·nî ’aḇ ·šā·lō·wm ’aḇ·šā·lō·wm bə·nî bə·nî*): “Repetition, the staccato rhythm, and syntactical discontinuity convey emotional intensity” (2016, 453).

Female Shaming Speech

We may have here in Prov. 31:1–9 an example of female “shaming speech.” This is a phrase employed by Victor Matthews to describe those situations where a woman speaks to defend her household (or, that is, the household of her father, husband, or son) when its honor is threatened or diminished (1994, 8). Matthews writes, “If a member of the household performs or is about to perform some action that would reflect badly on the household, it is the responsibility of every other member to attempt to prevent a repetition of this dishonorable action or to convince the deviant to reconsider his or her actions and come back into compliance with honorable behavior” (1998, 98).

Biblical texts frequently portray women taking up this task through shaming speech. Such shaming can occur privately, as when Judah’s daughter-in-law Tamar sends him a note concerning the circumstances of her pregnancy (Gen. 38), making clear his failure in his social obligation to provide heirs for his dead son, her husband. Also, when David’s daughter, the other biblical Tamar, seeks to persuade her brother Amnon not to rape her, and then, when he does, not to reject her, she appeals to social codes (2 Sam. 13:12) and his reputation in the court of public opinion (v. 13) (Matthews 1994, 9). But shaming in public also occurs, contributing extra force through audience support (Matthews 1998, 100). Achsah publicly shames her father Caleb for giving her husband an inferior plot of land (Judges 1). A widow rejected by her brother-in-law for levirate marriage incurs the right to defend her dead husband’s honor through shaming the rejector in the city gates (Deut. 25:5–10) (Matthews 1994, 9).

Matthews further writes:

[S]haming speech is a social control mechanism. It is designed, through reasoning or by employing a sort of “vocabulary of embarrassment,” to make the prodigal or the enemy rethink their plans or suppress their unacceptable speech. Shaming speech calls on each person to behave honorably, with carefully thought out actions, not in the manner of fools who act in the height of passion, without

thinking. Generally, shaming speech will take the form of a wisdom argument, calling on traditional practice, social codes, and covenantal allegiance (1998, 99).⁶

In Proverbs 31 we can see this effort to stimulate conformity via the “vocabulary of embarrassment” that Matthews mentions in the mother’s stark calling out of both disapproved behaviors (overindulgence in women (v. 3), and drinking (v. 4), neglecting justice (v. 5)) and approved behaviours (restraint from overindulgence, just rule (vv. 8–9)). The female speaker invites echoes of chapter 1–9’s Lady Wisdom crying out her social codes, communal practices, and allegiances.

Considering the Womb

Inserted into this presumed shaming speech, in the middle of one indicator of emotion, the stuttering expression of v. 2, is the word, *biṭ-nî* (“my womb”). This phrase arouses interest in a study of emotion in light of the analysis of emotion in the Bible mentioned above as expressed through conceptual metaphors based upon human anatomy. The womb is, obviously, a portion of the body, but is its mention here to be associated with emotion? Is it a conceptual metaphor? Commentators have not generally recognized it as such, taking it instead as a poetic reminder of Lemuel’s relation to his mother, or as perhaps alluding to the dedication of Hannah to her son Samuel *in utero* (Chapman 2016, 121), and also Bathsheba to Solomon (Dell 2006, 180). Such connections are reasonable; they can contribute to meaning, but is there more to be said? Could such associations benefit from consideration of how *beten* might function also as the source domain of a conceptual metaphor that communicates emotion?

Let’s look more closely at this word, *beten*. It occurs 72 times in the Hebrew Bible, most commonly in Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah. It can refer to either male or female inner organs, these commonly understood as “the seat of one’s feelings” (Koehler et al 1994–2000, 1219). Most often *beten* references a woman’s uterus to invoke a pre-born existence or origin. *Beten* can occur interchangeably with *re-ḥem* (Job 3:11, 31:15, Isa. 49:15), a synonym more exclusive to females and usually used to reference offspring as being the “fruit of one’s womb” or birth as “opening the womb.” Expressions utilizing *re-ḥem* may translate as meaning to have pity on or feel compassion for another.

Already with both *beten* and its synonym, *re-ḥem*, we note an obvious association of these terms with emotion, and it’s not hard to understand why in light of the definition supplied above by Hogan of emotion involving movement of the body in response to some eliciting condition. The womb does move. As reference to the stomach area in general, which clenches in situations of fear or anger, or as denoting

⁶ See also Lyn M. Bechtel. 1991. “Shame as a Sanction of Social Control in Biblical Israel: Judicial, Political, and Social Shaming.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 49: 47–76.

the uterus in particular, which expands, contracts and otherwise shifts and changes in response to a fetus within, the *beten* is highly evocative.

Emotive Meanings of *Beten*

In Proverbs 31, then, how might mention of *beten* serve as a conceptual metaphor of emotion? What is the nuance of meaning communicated through this associative term? Considerable variety exists concerning how researchers identify and categorize either emotion or affect. Seminal theorist Silvan Tomkins offers nine biologically-based affects, among them, enjoyment-joy, interest-excitement, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation and anger-rage (1987, 139). Scholars acknowledge some overlap among emotions, varying grades of emotion, and families of related emotions.⁷ The experiential basis of a conceptual metaphor of emotion and this context of Proverbs 31 allows for an assortment of positive (or desirable) and negative (or undesirable) emotions emanating from mention of “my womb” in Proverbs 31.

The first to note is attachment. Hogan writes,

Attachment is the emotion that leads us to want to be near someone else, to share a home with them, to have physical contact and cooperative interaction with them—particularly cooperative interaction that has no further purpose beyond the interaction itself, thus play. In attachment relations, the mere presence of the other person brings joy and his or her absence brings sadness. Moreover, attachment entails a particular interest in the physical and emotional well-being of the other person. Its most intense form appears in early parent-child bonding (2011, 199).

When Lemuel’s mother says, “son of my womb,” she emanates attachment and—as her forthcoming words of correction reinforce—desire to see her son flourish, investment in his success. The source domain for this conceptual metaphor of emotion is that *in utero* relation when a mother is literally attached to her child via umbilical cord, is literally the provider of all sustenance, surrounds and shields her child completely.

In light of this attachment and combined with the tension of interpersonal conflict and Lemuel’s presumed waywardness, mention of “my womb” here also communicates the *sadness of loss*, the loss that occurs when attached people are separated, either physically or relationally. In this context, “son of my womb” acknowledges these two as no longer attached as in the past, that mother can no longer perfectly provide or shield, as much as the focus of her words and intensity of her mode of expression indicate that she might wish to. There is loss, also, of influence, in that the son’s implied behavior appears to deviate from the mother’s teaching.

⁷ For example, Helen Block Lewis identifies shame variants of humiliation, mortification, embarrassment, chagrin, and shyness (Lewis 1987, 113).

Distress-anguish is also communicated via, “my womb!” Emotion, as we have mentioned, is highly social. Humans feel the pain of another even when not particularly attached, but so much the more when they are. Distress occurs in witnessing a son’s foolish choices, seeing or anticipating the consequences to follow, being unable to prevent certain harm. This pain and helplessness is effectively communicated via “womb” as conceptual metaphor of emotion whose source domain commonly involves all sorts of pain throughout pregnancy, labor, and delivery.

Nourishing Counsel

When we recognize the implicit emotions of attachment and loss communicated through mention of “my womb,” a connection becomes apparent between this phrase and a second reference to the body in Prov. 31:1–9. Verses 8 and 9: “*Open your mouth for the speechless, on behalf of all who are perishing. Open your mouth—judge rightly! Plead the case of the oppressed and needy.*” The phrase, “open your mouth,” is commonly understood to mean that Lemuel should act justly with respect to the poor and downtrodden. Within the context of this mother-son confrontation, with the mother speaking emotionally, evoking her maternal role and function through mention of her womb, “open your mouth” additionally conjures the image of a nursing child, opening to receive nourishment from a mother’s breast. Mention of the womb at the beginning of the mother’s lecture can be understood as attempting to stimulate in this son his own (perhaps long buried or forgotten) feelings of attachment and loss for her, his mother. These would prime him then to mitigate loss and reattach through receiving the “food” his mother now offers him: her ethical counsel.

Will this work, will this mother’s affective energy transfer her “burden” (as v. 1 describes her words) onto him? As mentioned earlier, Lemuel exists on two levels in Prov. 31:1–9. He is the object to whom his mother speaks, and he is, in light of the ambiguity inherent to v.1, also the speaker, recalling his mother’s words as spoken in the past, repeated now for some undisclosed present purpose. The fact that Lemuel recalls his mother’s words in itself signifies their impact. They were not forgotten; they did sink in. Even as we understand the mention of “my womb” as expressing and stimulating both attachment and loss, we ought to consider how its mention might shift in meaning and impact when vv. 2–9 are understood not only as a rebuke but as a *memory* of rebuke, as Lemuel’s memory.

Among cognitive theorists, consensus has emerged that memory is not a “carbon copy of an original experience” but a version of the past reconstructed according to current needs of the one remembering (Klein 2003, 65). In Proverbs 31, we may suspect influence of the present upon the remembered past in light of the text’s adult themes of sex, drinking, oppression and suffering delivered as a scolding fit for a child, received with childlike silence by the son.

Memories can also be disorganized or disjointed (Crespo and Fernandez-Lansac 2016, 149). Some studies have shown traumatic narratives to be dominated by sensory and emotional details (Crespo and Fernandez-Lansac 2016, 149). Conceiving Prov. 31:2–9 as a memory makes a certain sense of the abrupt shifts in topic described above. As recorded memory, vv. 2–9 could be comprised of several corrections that occurred at different times but are here compiled into one, or they could distill a lengthy tongue-lashing. They could form the stream-of-consciousness recall of a son mid-crisis, drawing upon this memory, however inexact, to process current circumstances. Psychiatrist Donald Nathanson explains, “Affect can produce or trigger memory just as memories can produce affect” (1987, 36). The former scenario occurs when the cause of an emotion cannot immediately be identified. Our emotion system searches through our memories to find one that is already linked with the present emotion as a means of discovering some cause for the emotion, an aid to making sense of it (Nathanson 1987, 36).

Within this purported memory in Proverbs 31 of a mother’s rebuke sits *beten*—“womb”—in the phrase, *biṭ-nî*, “my womb,” in the longer, *bar biṭ-nî*, “son of my womb.” Foregrounding now Lemuel, what meaning could the womb as conceptual metaphor of emotion offer him? What embodied experience does the womb communicate for a remembering son?

The Womb, For a Remembering Son

The womb, as Psalm 139 describes, is for human offspring the space of origin and development (v. 13 “*You created my inner parts; you hid me in my mother’s womb*”). As a universal experience, even if only as imagined long after occupancy, the womb can represent safety, provision, privacy, solitude, intimacy, and contentment. Within the context of Proverbs 31’s relational discord and personal criticism, mention of this idyllic space can imply concerning Lemuel an affect, some type of longing to flee, to escape or retreat into a circumstance of contentment such as presumably exists in the womb. Whatever echoes of breastfeeding, too, may hover in vv. 8-9 also evoke a highly sensorial, affective event.

The womb, the breast: expressions of desire indicate a present lack. Therefore, a longing for contentment, security, escape, such as is expressed here by Lemuel in recalling his mother suggests that the emotions Lemuel is most likely *currently* feeling would be opposites to these. Perhaps fear? Distress? Sorrow? Shame? We have already identified relationally-based reasons within the mother’s lecture for distress and sorrow and acknowledged that we cannot know what circumstances may have provoked this emotional memory in Lemuel. But let’s focus more on the emotion of shame.

Shame can be understood as a response to an internal perception of exposed deficiency of the self, resulting in alienation. As people grow, they internalize values, expectations, goals, and ideals communicated by others, most commonly, their parents (Bechtel 1991, 49). Shame occurs when a person experiences an unexpected

discrepancy between an internalized ideal and a perceived reality associated with the self (Kinston 1987, 216). The self perceives itself to have failed in some way, to be weak, deficient, or dirty (Wurmser 1987, 78). Shamed persons experience a primal urge to hide, disappear, or die. This urge can manifest physically, as in hanging the head (Kaufman 1989, 18), blushing, or fleeing the scene. Because internalized ideals form in relation to others, the failure to meet these ideals results in a loss of social bonding, or alienation from one's social group.

Recall our earlier explanation of Prov. 31:1–9 resembling the shaming speech of other biblical texts. Matthews' vocabulary of embarrassment, cited earlier, must work through convicting Lemuel of deficiency in some way that matters according to the values of the social network(s) to which Lemuel belongs. Deficiency seen by others is a criterion for shame (Kaufman 1989, 17). In Proverbs 31, mention of "son" three times in v. 2 drives home Lemuel's mother's gaze upon him. In the poem's later verses, repeated mention occurs of those of the lower class who rely upon him. They are the sons of oppression (v. 5), the perishing (v. 6, v. 8) and bitter of soul (v. 6), speechless (v. 8), poor and oppressed (v. 9). The repetition increases Lemuel's sense of the number of judging eyes that surround. In this context, the mother's womb—private, secure—would promise relief from such public scrutiny. If expressed desire betrays a lack, then for remembering Lemuel the womb mention indeed suggests an experience of shame.

Affective Power

Recognizing these emotions displayed by Lemuel's mother, and as recalled by Lemuel, clarifies Lemuel's mother's true priorities and rhetorical intent. Cognitive psychologists assert that emotion, rather than an alternative to reason or thought, is itself one aspect or means of cognition (Hogan 2011, 204; Kuhn 2009, 16–17; Robinson 2010, 82). Recall Robinson's explanation of emotion as bodily responses activating an instinctive appraisal of a given situation (2010, 72). It is interesting to note the shift in topic and delivery through the poem's progression, from pure stuttering (v. 2) to naming behavior Lemuel shouldn't be engaging (vv. 3–5) to focusing on what he *should* do as king (vv. 6–9). Does this progression enact the very process of instinctive appraisal that Robinson describes? Kuhn writes, "When we take a look at what it is that really moves us, what it is that consistently has us fuming or tied up in knots or erupting in praise, then we will begin to get a sense of what we really value and what we really believe about the world" (2009, 24). The sex, the drinking, the jurisprudence, these are addressed with increasingly specific connection to their impact on others: v. 3: involvement with certain women could destroy Lemuel; v. 5: excessive alcoholic consumption could compromise Lemuel's juridical duties toward the underclass; v. 8-9: kingly activity should benefit those who suffer and are oppressed.

The emotional conceptual metaphor of the womb as analysed above reinforces this conviction concerning societal interdependence. Just as Lemuel *in utero*

depended entirely upon his mother for his survival, in such manner the underclass now depends on him. Mother and son were, literally, and are, relationally— affectively—attached, with activity of one affecting the other, positively or negatively. Lemuel's mother in vv. 5–9 urges her son to recognize that this same relation exists between Lemuel and those he governs. His actions affect them, and their actions in response to his actions will rebound to affect him, including his political stability and position.

In vv. 5–9 Lemuel's mother references the underclass with graphic variety: sons of oppression, perishing, bitter of soul, in poverty, toiling, speechless, and needy. *Son of my womb!* As she feels Lemuel's pain and he feels hers, so her repeated depictions of the underclass urge his feeling what they feel: the bitterness, hopelessness, pain of living in hard toil, ill health, and lack of security or resources needed to live. *Open your mouth!* (Asserted twice!) Not only means this phrase an invitation, as explained above, for him to receive her nourishing teaching, but also an invitation for him to imitate her open mouth, her speaking. She, out of her love for him as mother, the distress she feels in seeing or anticipating his pain, exercises maternal care in vocalizing ethical counsel. He too, this mother conveys, should feel womb-pain for his people and in like maternal manner speak up for their good.

At this point it seems fitting to note two key differences between the deployment of emotion in Proverbs 1–9 and that enacted in chapter 31. In both sections expressions of emotion reinforce the instruction that is given; in both the instruction is framed as coming from a parent, and in both a female speaks (Lady Wisdom in chapters 1–9) to direct (presumably) young men toward right objects. But chapter 31 replaces the father as primary instructor with a mother. Also, whereas chapters 1–9 project a generic household and downplay any elitism of the family depicted, chapter 31 reveals a stark class distinction between these two royals and the suffering poor. The first shift taps into an emotional register unavailable to a father, in light of its reliance on the womb to impress upon readers its message of societal interdependence. The second also intensifies the earlier chapters' teachings concerning a moral and flourishing life through appeal of what's at stake beyond a young man's own life.

Parental attachment and loss are near universal; their presence in Prov. 31:1–9 maximizes likelihood that audiences will relate to its familial tension, consciously or subconsciously transfer their own emotional memories of separation into the story world, experience the distress of the poem and extract lessons from it. Originators of a text (its author/s or editor/s) cannot control what is learned or how—such will vary according to readers' personality, skills in reading, personal experiences, and so on (Kuhn 2009, 50). Yet if, through identification and inferred emotion, sympathy builds for characters, the likelihood increases that an audience will adopt the agenda of those they have aligned themselves with, which usually works out to be those promoted in the text. In Prov. 31:1–9, a pained mother rebukes her son, with words he remembers and recalls. These two share concerns for power and prosperity, promoting the permeable nature of personal responsibility and

communal impact. Identification and desire foment within readers their own assent to these concerns and their remedy.

Ethical Critique

Such rhetorical achievement can be critiqued on ethical grounds. Using a postcolonial interpretive frame, Makhosazana Keith Nzimande notes the effectiveness with which Lemuel's mother urges plying the impoverished with alcohol that they might forget their misery. She labels Lemuel's mother "a hauntingly tricky figure who can easily dupe the marginalized into believing that she cares about their plight while she covertly silences their struggles" (2005, 186). We might also consider Lemuel's mother's warning about women, those capable of destroying kings (v. 3). Is this a case of displaced blame, as Jephthah proclaimed when his daughter emerged from his house after battle, when he said, "Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down" (Judges 11:35)? We don't hear from these women of v. 3, don't know their stories, and therefore cannot empathize with them. Furthermore, even as Lemuel's mother advocates for her son to judge and speak for the "speechless," we might do well to ask: these underclass, what actually is their experience of the king and his "justice"? What would they say for themselves about their plight, wherein attention to historical and cultural context would suggest they cannot consume the crops they grow, taken for tribute or trade to support this ruling class? The political and cultural vision promoted here advocates a care for the poor that legitimates one family's reign. Attentiveness to emotion empowers readers to guard against its stealthy power, to not just feel but also interrogate feelings, becoming more choosy as regards embrace of the text and its focalized figures.

Conclusion

This article has surfaced several indicators of emotion in Prov. 31:1–9, in particular, how mention of the womb as a conceptual metaphor signals a cluster of emotions reverberating between Lemuel and his mother in this (remembered) scene. It has often been noted, but without exploration as to significance, that Proverbs 31 contains the only explicit presentation in Ancient Near Eastern literature of a mother instructing a son. This study fills that gap. Manifold associations with the womb—a body part uniquely connecting mother and son—based upon the near-universal experiences of parent-child attachment and loss, convey values of societal interdependence and the warrant for an audience to align itself with these values and pursue them. Only a speaking mother can in this precise fashion convey this message, working out through the processing of her affective reaction to her son that all those upon whom others depend should be feeling womb-ey, too.

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