PROV 31:10-31
A Laudatio Funebris?

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The key hermeneutical question that confronts every Scripture scholar who studies the alphabetic acrostic text of Prov 31:10-31 is whether the figure of the בִּלְלָה הַשָּׁפָיָה is to be treated as a portrait of a real woman or as a symbol. Both alternatives pose further questions. If it is affirmed to be a symbol, the next question is, “of what?” If, on the other hand, it is claimed to be a portrait of a real woman, the subsequent question is, “Could this claim be proven at textual level, even if only through similar portraits in ancient literature?”

In terms of attention given by scholars to these subsequent questions, the latter is doubtless the neglected of the two. Apart from A. Wolters, who suggests that the alphabetic acrostic text could be a “heroic hymn,”1 much of the discussion on the בִּלְלָה הַשָּׁפָיָה is silent on its literary genre. Wolters himself comments on this lacuna:

The commentaries on Proverbs... when they come to the con-

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cluding pericope of the book, virtually cease to ask form-critical questions. Once it has been established that we are dealing with an alphabetic acrostic, attention is turned to other things.²

Wolters' form-critical analysis offers one possibility of responding to the question of whether לְהַרְבִּי נַעֲרֶא, as a portrait of a real woman, could be proven at textual level. The similarities that he points out between Prov 31:10-31 and the twin alphabetic psalms Ps 111 and 112,³ especially in their structure and theme, are valid observations. The connection he suggests between Prov 31:10-31 and the heroic poetry tradition—which includes the Song of Deborah in Judg 5, David's lamentation over Jonathan and Saul in 2 Sam 1, and the women's song after Israel's victory over the Philistines in 1 Sam 18—is also quite plausible. However, the exaggerated attention he gives to one participle, סֹּפְּפִּיָּה (םַקְּנֵן), which he treats as key⁴ to identifying the literary genre of Prov 31:10-31 as a “heroic hymn,” has caused him, in my opinion, to overlook the significance of the tenses of the majority of the other verbs in the text.⁵ Wolters mentions in particular P. Joüon when he speaks about commentaries that ignore the anomalous form of נַעֲרֶא.⁶ But he himself fails to take account of the important point that Joüon tries to bring out in his article, viz.,


³Wolters takes special note of the fact that Ps 111 is also classified as a hymn, cf. “Heroic Hymn,” 448-49.

⁴Wolters identifies נַעֲרֶא as the kind of participle which Gunkel calls hymnische Partizipien, describing the praiseworthy deeds recounted in the body of the hymn; cf. “Heroic Hymn,” 450; also A. Wolters, “Soppiyyah (Prov 31:27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on Sophia,” JBL 104 (1985) 577-87.


"Le choix des formes verbales... en grande majorité, indiquent clairement la sphère du passé."7

I take Joüon’s indication above as my point of departure for this paper. By pointing out that the verbs indicate “the sphere of the past,” Joüon suggests that the subject of our text is a woman who has already passed away, and is hereby being praised by her bereaved husband and children. Everything about her is concrete and precise, but in the past. The expression “all the days of her life” (v. 12) implies that by now they are over, and her smile over (the thought of) the day יָדִיעַ (v. 25) may be construed as referring to the day of her death. The woman is certainly real, even though presented in an idealized manner in the text.8 If Joüon’s proposal is accepted, then the praise of the bereaved husband and/or children could most likely be a kind of laudatio funebris, a funeral oration. Can this be proven at textual level by means of examples in ancient literature that present similar portraits of an “excellent wife”? This is the primary issue that I will deal with in this paper.

I would like to propose the possibility that Prov 31:10-31 is of the literary genre known as laudatio funebris by presenting some examples of Greek and Latin inscriptions on tombstones of women identified primarily as wives. My principal example will be a selection from the extant portion of a very lengthy Latin tombstone inscription, the so-called Laudatio Turiae. Because of its length and richness in detail, it lends itself more easily to this kind of investigation, but other shorter inscriptions offer equally valuable information. I shall examine these examples side by side with the alphabetic acrostic text and identify their points of similarity in support of my thesis.

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7Joüon, 349.
8Ibid., 349-50.
Clues from Greek and Latin Tombstone Inscriptions

R. Lattimore, in his doctoral dissertation (1934), analyzed and classified the themes of the published inscriptions on Greek and Latin epitaphs.\(^9\) A number of his findings are relevant to our own investigation. Under the themes “Praise of Married Life” and “Women in Epitaphs,” the following two observations bear directly on our study: 1) that “women play a very important part in sepulchral inscriptions, Greek as well as Latin,” \(^{10}\) and 2) that “praiseworthy qualities... are mostly attributed to women.”\(^{11}\) If these observations are true for these two great civilizations (viz., the Greek and the Roman), it can be surmised with a fair degree of probability that the same is true for the Hebrew civilization that produced the alphabetic acrostic text we find in Prov 31:10-31—reflecting, I would suppose, a value which is trans-geographical and trans-cultural.\(^{12}\)

A third observation which is of interest to our investigation is that “perhaps the epitaphs give us more the ideal than the actuality.”\(^{13}\) Interestingly, many Bible scholars who have analyzed the alphabetic acrostic text, give observations that almost echo Lattimore’s

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\(^{9}\)According to his estimates, edited and published Latin epitaphs must be considerably more than a hundred thousand, dating from as early as 300 BCE, while those in Greek would run to tens of thousands, dating from as early as 700 BCE; cf. R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Roman Epitaphs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1942) 14-15.

\(^{10}\)Lattimore, 275; he also adds: “The world disclosed by Greek epitaphs is mostly a woman’s world, existing at a time when the old Athenian ideal had gone out of fashion even as an ideal.” Cf. 293.

\(^{11}\)Ibid.

\(^{12}\)I say this without suggesting any idea of influence from these two great civilizations, which may be too early to tell at the time of the writing of the alphabetic acrostic text.

\(^{13}\)Lattimore, 275.
words. J. Hausmann, for example, says: “The description of the woman is not truly real; no one can perform all that she does.” Likewise C. Camp sees in the לְהָנָא נְתָנָה of Prov 31:10-31 “an idealized portrait of a wise wife in an ideal household in an ideal society.” Also A. Bonora calls the text “un canto alla donna ideale.” And again for Joüon, “the woman is certainly real, even though presented in an idealized manner in the text.” Lattimore's clarification of the concept of “ideal” has an important implication on the alphabetic acrostic text. He says: “this ideal concedes considerable importance to the position of women in the household. They are thought of, not as subservient, but as free partners, and the success of the family is thought of as dependent in large measure to their qualities.” Our לְהָנָא נְתָנָה clearly fits this description. She is not only a non-subservient, free partner who manages with skill both the household and the family business, but “the heart of her husband trusts in her” (v. 11) and she is considered to be “far more precious than jewels” (v. 10). The success of her family is construed from the fact that “Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: ‘Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all’ ” (vv. 28-29).

The general observations of Lattimore regarding the inscriptions on wives’ tombstones that he has examined show a striking resonance with the portrayal of the לְהָנָא נְתָנָה in Prov 31:10-31. In the next section, I will explore further these resonances by presenting specific examples of Greek and Latin tombstone inscriptions.

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17Joüon, 349-50.

18Lattimore, 280.
Parallel Ideas in Greek and Latin
Tombstone Inscriptions and Prov 31:10-31

The most attested parallel idea between the tombstone inscriptions and the alphabetic acrostic text is that of “working with wool.” It appears several times in tombstone inscriptions to represent domesticity and old-fashioned ways, as these examples of Latin inscriptions illustrate:

gravitatem officio et lanificio praestitei\textsuperscript{19}
lana cui e manibus nuncquam sine causse recessit\textsuperscript{20}
nec labos huic defuit nec vellerum inscia fila\textsuperscript{21}
lanificio studi\textsuperscript{22}

In one Greek epitaph inscription, the idea of working with wool is conveyed through the symbol of the “work-basket” (τάλαρος).\textsuperscript{23} G.H.R. Horsley speaks of the idea of wool-working as “a cliché in epitaphs.”\textsuperscript{24} The presence of the same expression in v. 13 of the Proverbs text (“She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands”) strongly suggests that, like the tombstone inscriptions cited above, the alphabetic acrostic text could be a laudatio funebris, a work written in honor of a deceased wife and mother.

Another idea which Horsley points out as “a cliché in epitaphs” is \textit{domum servavit}, referring to a wife’s ability in running the house-

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 297; cf. also F. Buecheler, \textit{Carmina Latina Epigrammata} (Leipzig, 1895-1897) 63-64.

\textsuperscript{20}Lattimore, 297; cf. also Buecheler, 1988, 14.

\textsuperscript{21}Lattimore, 297; cf. also Buecheler, 492, 16; 52; 237; 1123; 1996.


\textsuperscript{23}Lattimore, 293.

\textsuperscript{24}Horsley, 35.
hold. Lattimore’s study reaffirms this observation: “the virtues we find always holding the highest place are the old-fashioned domestic virtues of women.” The idea of הָלַעְפָּא as “watching over” (the ways of her household) in Prov 31:27 is faithfully captured in Latin by the concepts of “vigilans” and “custos” as found in the following tombstone inscriptions:

Postumia Matronilla inconstarabilis coniux... pudica religiosa laboriosa frugi efficaxs vigilans sollicita univara unicuba totius industriae et fidei matrona...

fortis, sancta, tenax, insons, fidissima custos, munda domi, sat munda foras...

The idea of “industriousness”—which is portrayed in the alphabetic acrostic text through this pair of expressions: “She rises while it is yet night” and “Her lamp does not go out at night”—finds an echo in this portion of tombstone inscription: “always first out of bed, and the last to go to bed and rest” (prima Toro delapsa fuit, eadem ultima lecto).

But woman is not only recognized and praised for her efficiency in the domestic sphere. The following Greek tombstone inscription

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25 Ibid.
26 Lattimore, 300.
28 Lattimore, 298; cf. also Buecheler, 1988.
29 The epitaph inscription is actually dedicated by a Roman patron to his deceased mistress, to whom he attributes all the virtues of a Roman matron. The complete text runs as follows: “fortis, sancta, tenax, insons, fidissima custos, munda domi, sat munda foras, notissima volgo, sola erat ut posset factis occurrere cunctis. exiguo sermone inprehensa manebat, prima Toro delapsa fuit, eadem ultima lecto se tuit ad quietem positis ex ordine rebus, lana cui e manibus nuncquam sine caussa recessit, opseguioque prior nulla moresque salubes.” Cf. Lattimore, 298.
presents two important elements which, surprisingly, are also present in the alphabetic acrostic text:

οὖνεκα δὴ σοφίῃ τε σοφροσύνῃ τε νῷ τε πουλῷ τι πασάων

προφερεστάτη ἑσκε γυναικῶν.30

[Therefore for wisdom, discretion, and wit she is far above all women.]

The first element is the attribution of wisdom to the deceased wife. The same idea appears in our Proverbs text, where the כְּלָי לֹאֹנִי is not only praised for her skill in running the household and the family business, but also for her wisdom: “She opens her mouth with wisdom…” (v. 26). The second element is the superlative assessment of the wife, in comparison with other women. We find the same idea expressed in Prov 31:29: “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

The above-mentioned similarities in themes and ideas between certain Greek and Latin tombstone inscriptions and Prov 31:10-31 are too numerous to be dismissed as merely coincidental. It is true that the brevity of the tombstone inscriptions cited does not permit more in-depth analysis in terms of style and structure. For this reason, I shall present a major example, a full-blown laudatio funebris, of such length that would permit a more thorough comparative analysis with the Proverbs text (see Table 1).

A Comparative Analysis of Prov 31:10-31 and the Laudatio Turiae

It is readily evident that the Proverbs text and the Laudatio Turiae both speak in praise of a wife. But there are certain basic differences which must be clarified before proceeding with the comparison. First, whereas the Laudatio Turiae is clearly a laudatio funebris, Prov 31:10-31 makes no explicit mention of the fact of the wife's death, which

30Lattimore, 291.
is perhaps why it is not immediately associated with the literary genre of *laudatio funebris*. To resolve this difficulty, we refer to the earlier discussion of Joüon's proposal that the tenses of the verbs point to the "sphere of the past," implying the demise of the subject of praise. In a way, this interpretation explains and makes up for the lack of an explicit mention of the wife's death, which could even be a deliberate literary device.

Second, whereas in the *Laudatio Turiae*, it is evidently the husband who pronounces the praise in the form of a dialogue with the deceased wife, in Prov 31:10-31, the praise is put in the mouth of an unspecified speaker, certainly not the husband, who in the text is also referred to in the third person (v. 28b, "her husband also, he praises her"). Lattimore's finding regarding the implied author or speaker of the funeral praise in epitaphs gives us a clearer perspective regarding this difficulty:

We are perpetually at a loss as regards the problem of authorship. Sometimes this is avowed, whether by a person who composes his own epitaph while still alive, or by one who dedicates an epigram to a dead friend or relative. In such cases, we can only take the speakers at their word. On the other hand, when the dead person is made to speak in his own character, he may express sentiments which never were, but which have been put into his mouth, for one reason or another, by the dedicator of the tomb. Accordingly when a dead wife speaks fondly of her living husband, or a dead slave of his living master, we cannot always be sure whose opinion is being represented. It is only likely what the dedicator would like to have believed.31

In the light of this finding, the difference with regard to the person who pronounces the praise—the husband in the case of the *Laudatio Turiae*, an unspecified speaker in the case of Prov 31:10-31—need not be seen as constituting an objection to the possibility that the Proverbs text is also a *laudatio funebris*, or that its dedicator is in fact the husband. For the implied speaker of the praise is not

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31Ibid., 20.
Table 1. The Texts of Proverbs 31:10-31 and the So-called Laudatio Turiae

The text of Laudatio Turiae shown below is a selection of the extant portion of a huge inscription, possibly built originally into the structure of a tomb. The husband and wife are both anonymous, although attempts have been made to identify them with Q. Lucretius Vespillo (19 BCE) and his wife Turia, after whom the inscription was named. This is by far the longest Latin inscription erected by a private individual. In form, this text is a funeral oration, perhaps read by the husband at his wife’s grave.

Proverbs 31:10-31

10 A good wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. 13 She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. 14 She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from afar. 15 She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and tasks for her maidens. 16 She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. 17 She girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong. 18 She perceives

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| Uncommon are marriages which last so long, brought to an end by death, not broken apart by divorce; for it was our happy lot that it should be prolonged to the 41st year without estrangement. Would that our venerable association had been dissolved by something happening to me rather than to you, which it would have been fairer that I as the older surrendered to fate! As for your domestic virtues, loyalty (to our marriage), obed-

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<th>Column 2</th>
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<td>When the world was at peace, and our homeland restored, then we attained restful and happy times. Children had been our hope, which for some considerable time Fate had begrudged us. If Fortune had borne to continue taking care of us in her established way, what would either of us have failed to obtain? But by continuing in another direction, Fortune was putting an end to our hope. What you did because of this, and the steps you attempted, may perhaps be striking and astonishing in certain other women, yet in you they are scarcely to be wondered at when compared to your other virtues; and I pass over them. When</td>
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that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp
does not go out at night. She puts her hands
to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches
out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid
of snow for her household, for all her house-
hold are clothed in scarlet. She makes herself
coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the gates, when
he sits among the elders of the land. She
makes linen garments and sells them; she de-
livers girdles to the merchant. Strength and
dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the
time to come. She opens her mouth with
wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on
her tongue. She looks well to the ways of
her household, and does not eat the bread of
idleness. Her children rise up and call her
blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:
Many women have done excellently, but
you surpass them all. Charm is deceitful
and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears
the Lord is to be praised. Give her of the
fruit of her hands, and let her works praise
her in the gates.

ence, courteousness, easy good-
nature, your assiduous wool-
working, attention, modest refine-
ment—what need have I to make
mention of these? Why should I
speak of your love for your own,
your devotion to your family, since
you have treated with equal honor
my mother and your own parents,
and provided for her the same
peace (in retirement) as for your
own family; and other virtues too
many to count you possess in
common with other married
women who cherish a good name.
Distinctive of you are these fea-
tures which I am declaring, and
very few women have met with
similar circumstances so that they
should suffer such experiences and
manifest such achievements, mat-
ters which the Fortune of women
has taken care to ensure are sel-
dom their lot.

you despaired of your fertility, and lamented my
childlessness lest, by retaining you in marriage, I
might resign my hope of having children and as
a result suffer misfortune, you spoke plainly about
divorce. You would hand over our house freely
to the fertility of another woman, with no other
intention than that, depending on our harmoni-
ous relationship, you yourself would seek and
provide for me a match that was fitting and ap-
propriate. And you affirmed that you would treat
the children-to-be as ours in common, and as
though they were your own; and that you would
not make division of our inheritance which was
still held in common, but that it would remain
under my authority—and if I wished—under
your management. You would have nothing di-
vided, nothing separated, and thereafter you
would manifest the functions and devotion of a
sister and a mother-in-law. But as for you, what
is more worthy of remembrance that you made
it your business, in service of my interests, that
when I could not have children by you, yet through
you I should have them, and because of your
despair of having children, you would provide
offspring by my marriage to another woman?

(Sydney: Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1983) 33, 35.
always automatically to be identified with its real author. As Lattimore suggests, we just have to “take the speakers at their word.”

One point of similarity between the two texts is their notable length, in contrast to the more epigrammatic tombstone inscriptions which I have cited earlier as examples. Prov 31:10-31 is somehow shorter than the Laudatio Turiae. It consists of 22 verses, and is intentionally made so, in order to correspond to the number of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet. On the other hand, the extant portion of the Laudatio Turiae is estimated to be about 120 lines. The importance of this observation lies in the fact that the length of the texts points to a common characteristic of the women being praised—that is, they both belong to a family of considerable means. This fact can also be read between the lines of the texts, especially in the case of Prov 31:10-31, for which the only material evidence we have is the biblical text itself (or the manuscripts at most). In the case of the Laudatio Turiae, the material form in which the text comes (the inscribed slabs of stone), also suggests very strongly the idea of affluence. In fact, this artifact is considered to be so far “the longest Latin inscription erected by a private individual,” a luxury which only a wealthy private individual can afford.

Both praises begin with an expression which conveys the idea of “rarity.” Prov 31:10 has: “A good wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.” Laudatio Turiae has: “Uncommon are marriages which last so long, brought to an end by death, not broken apart by divorce.” Although the latter’s initial focus is on the marriage, the succeeding references are to what the wife has contributed to make that conjugal relationship rare and special. In both texts, the subsequent enumeration of praises builds upon and develops this idea of rarity, although the order of enumeration is not the same for both. For example, in both texts, the husband underscores the superlative qualities of the wife by comparing her with other women. In Proverbs, this is found toward the end of the text: “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all” (v. 29). In Laudatio Turiae, this is found at the beginning of the published text, in column 1:

Distinctive of you are these features which I am declaring, and
very few women have met with similar circumstances so that they should suffer such experiences and manifest such achievements, matters which the Fortune of women has taken care to ensure are seldom their lot.

Both texts speak of the wives as acting in the “interest” (Proverbs has “gain”) of their husbands. Laudatio Turiae is more specific on this, citing the particular instance which awakens fond memories in the husband: “But as for you, what is more worthy of remembrance than that you made it your business, in service of my interests, that when I could not have children by you, yet through you I should have them...?” The Proverbs text instead, is more general in its articulation: “[The heart of her husband trusts in her] and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life” (vv. 11-12).

As for the presentation of the wives’ virtues, Proverbs is more detailed and dynamic, using complete verbal sentences to illustrate the wife’s traits. On the other hand, the Laudatio Turiae begins with a mere enumeration of qualities, then wanders off to a lengthy and graphic description of examples in the form of reminiscences. One very striking similarity in the illustration of domestic virtues is the reference to “wool-working,” which, as mentioned above, is a “cliché in epitaphs.” Prov 31:13 has: “She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.” Laudatio Turiae simply puts it as: “your assiduous wool-working.”

It is certainly normal and, perhaps, to be expected that one should find a theological reference in the Proverbs text, but to find a parallel expression also in the Laudatio Turiae is indeed a surprise. The husband praises the wife, among other things, for her “reverence [for the gods] without superstition.” Although clearly polytheistic in color, the expression matches Prov 31:30—“...a woman who fears the Lord” (RSV, JB, NAB)—especially if we consider the fact that “fear” and “reverence” belong to the same semantic field.

The idea of the wives as “managers” is present in both texts—more dynamically depicted in Prov 31:10-31, but more explicit in its use of the term “management” in Laudatio Turiae. The Proverbs text,
without specific mention of the verb “manage,” illustrates the idea by presenting the wife’s numerous activities: she provides tasks for her maidens (v. 15), she considers a field and buys it (v. 16), she perceives that her merchandise is profitable (v. 18), she makes linen garments and sells them, she delivers girdles to the merchants (v. 24), she looks to the ways of her household (v. 27). In the Laudatio Turiae, we find the parallel idea in the husband’s reminiscence of the wife’s admirable disposition: “...and you would not make division of our inheritance which was still held in common, but that it would remain under my authority and—if I wished—under your management.” One can read between the lines that the wife was already performing the function of manager of their joint properties and that, in the episode being recalled, she was offering to carry on with this function despite the changes that would be introduced into their marriage. Although the function is not spelled out in detail as in the Proverbs text, the same idea of “the wife as manager” is conveyed.

Care for the household and the family are likewise more explicitly illustrated by means of deeds in the Proverbs text than in the Laudatio Turiae. In v. 15, the לנה נשה provides food for her household. In v. 25, she is said to be unafraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet. In v. 27, she is described as looking well to the ways of her household. In the Laudatio Turiae, the husband simply refers to “your love for your own” and “your devotion to your family.” I have decided to classify the example he cites here under the heading “charitable deeds,” since the act extends outside the immediate family circle (which includes normally only the husband and the children).

In both texts, the wife’s care is said to extend outside the immediate family circle. Both wives engage in charitable deeds. In the case of the Laudatio Turiae, the object of the wife’s benevolence was her mother-in-law, whom she treated with equal respect and solicitude as she did her own parents. In the case of the לנה נשה, the benevolent acts take on a more social and philanthropic character: “She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy” (v. 20). But despite the difference in the objects of their charitable
deeds, the fact remains that both women are held as benefactresses and are deemed worthy of praise for being such.

I have pointed out here only some of the more obvious parallels between Prov 31:10-31 and the published portion of the Laudatio Turiae (see Table 2). A closer analysis of both texts, especially in their Latin version, may yet reveal further similarities. But what has been discussed till this point already constitutes good grounds for drawing conclusions.

**Conclusion**

The clue provided by Joüon’s grammatical indication has opened up for me a floodgate of evidence to back up two related claims:

That the הָֽיָּלְתָּ הָֽשָּׁנָּא could be proven to be a portrait of a real woman who lived in the “sphere of the past”; and

That Prov 31:10-31 most likely belongs to the literary genre of laudatio funebris.

The two claims are related because the pursuit of the first has led to the discovery of the second. At textual level, portraits of real-life women described in a similar way as the הָֽיָּלְתָּ הָֽשָּׁנָּא are richly provided by Greek and Latin tombstone inscriptions dating from as early as 700 BCE. The sheer number of examples available satisfies the criterion of “multiple witnesses.” The thematic parallels and terminological affinity between the Proverbs text, on the one hand, and a good number of these inscriptions, on the other, are too many to be simply brushed aside as a matter of coincidence.

My principal witness, the Laudatio Turiae, is acknowledged to belong to the genre of laudatio funebris. Its many points of similarity with Prov 31:10-31—the impressive length, the verbal tenses, the subject of the praise, the many thematic resonances—lead me to believe that our biblical text is also of the same literary genre. With all due respect to Wolters’ thesis that Prov 31:10-31 is a “heroic hymn,” I must confess that I find it difficult to associate the הָֽיָּלְתָּ הָֽשָּׁנָּא
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Prov 31:10-31</th>
<th>Laudatio Turiae</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rarity</td>
<td>A good wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels (v. 10).</td>
<td>Uncommon marriages which last so long, brought to an end by death, not broken by divorce.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Superlative quality of the wife in comparison with other women</td>
<td>Many women have done excellently but you surpass them all (v. 29).</td>
<td>Distinctive of you are these features which I am declaring, and very few women have met with similar circumstances so that they should suffer such experiences and manifest such achievements, matters which the Fortune of women has taken care to ensure are seldom their lot.</td>
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<td>Wife acting in the interest of the husband</td>
<td>[The heart of her husband trusts in her] and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life (vv. 11-12).</td>
<td>But as for you, what is more worthy of remembrance than that you made it your business, in service of my interests, that when I could not have children by you yet through you I should have them…?</td>
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<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wool-working as domestic virtue</td>
<td>She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands (v. 13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theological reference</td>
<td>...a woman who fears the Lord... (v. 30).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wife as manager</td>
<td>[She provides] tasks for her maidens (v. 15); she considers a field and buys it (v. 16); she perceives that her merchandise is profitable (v. 18); she makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers girdles to the merchant (v. 24); she looks well to the ways of her household (v. 27).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charitable deeds</td>
<td>She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy (v. 20).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care for the family/household</td>
<td>[She] provides food for her household (v. 15); she is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household is clothed in scarlet (v. 21); she looks well to the ways of her household (v. 27).</td>
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</table>

...your assiduous wool-working...

...your reverence [for the gods] without superstition...

...and that you would not make division of our inheritance which was still held in common, but that it would remain under my authority and, if I wished it, under your management.

...you have treated with equal honor my mother and your own parents, and provided for her the same peace in retirement as for your own family.

Why should I speak of your love for your own, your devotion to your family...?
with the context (viz., military victory) and the subject of the praise (viz. men of war) of the examples he cites. I guess he pushes his claim a bit too far when he says that the לְחַם נַשִּׂיָּה should be understood as the female counterpart of the לְחַם נַפְשֵׁים. While it is true that the basic meaning of לְחַם is “army,” “power,” “strength,” in the military sense, its derived meanings of “wealth,” “value,” “worth,” “virtue,” “ability,” are just as frequently used. There is nothing in our text that even insinuates remotely the context of war nor the recognition of a valorous deed parallel to Jael’s in Judg 4:21. We have in Prov 31:10-31 a wife who, in her lifetime, had conducted the affairs of the household and the family business in a manner worthy of praise. We have a wealthy benefactress of the poor who is remembered after her death for her charitable deeds. She has done nothing to contribute to her people’s victory in war, for which reason the technical term “hero” is not appropriate to apply to her. Nonetheless she deserves the title לְחַם נַשִּׂיָּה, for in her lifetime she had been an “excellent wife” and a “virtuous woman,” deserving of praise in the gates of her city.

The title of this paper is in the form of an interrogative because I believe that what I have done is basically to create a “crack in the wall” and peer into the unexplored area within. I have described in a general and limited way what the tiny crack has permitted me to see. But behind the wall, there remains a vast area to be explored. Hopefully, what I have described here from the crack in the wall will serve as an invitation to some other researchers to explore what lies behind it and give a solidly based reply to the interrogative.
Appendix: The Latin Text of the So-called *Laudatio Turiae*

*Column 1*

Rara sunt tam diuturna matrimonia, finita morte, non divertio in terrupta; nam contiguit nobis ut ad annum XXXXI sine offensa perderetur. utinam vetustatem consortio habuisset mutationem vice m[a]e, qua iustius erat cedere fato maiorem. domestica bona pudicitiae, opsequi, comitatis, facilitatis, lanificii studii, religionis sine superstitione, o[r]natus non cons-piciendi, cultus modici dur memorem? cur dicam de tuo urum caritate, familiae pietate, cum aque matrem meam ac tuos parentes colueris eademque quietem illi quam tuis curaveris, cetera innumerabilia habueris communi cum omnibus matronis dignam [a]m colentibus? propria sunt tua quae vindico ac [per]paucae in tempora similia inciderunt, ut talia paterentur et praestarent, quae rara ut essent [mulierum] fortuna cavit.

*Column 2*


Tibi vero quid memorabilii quam inserviendo mihi o[peram dedisse] te ut quom ex te libera[ha]ere non possem, per te tamen [haberem et diff] dentia partus tui alterius c[oniugio parares fecunditatem].