

# 'Wealthy women' in Antiquity: The 'capable woman' of Proverbs 31:10–31 and Mibtahiah from Elephantine

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This article compares the anonymous 'capable woman' of Proverbs 31 with Mibtahiah of Elephantine. Both women are presented as wealthy occupiers of estates with economic success and influence in society. Both literary portraits unfold positive attitudes towards female characters, but present two divergent gender conceptions. The construction of Proverbs 31 depicts the 'capable woman' as an ideal character who amalgamates various social female roles and benefits from acting according to the wisdom teachings. The 'capable woman' provides a literary model of identification and imitation with an offer to share one's identity with her. The Elephantine papyri reveal a divergent conception of another wealthy woman with influence in society. Mibtahiah inherits an estate and enlarges her domain through additional economical purchase. She also takes a leading role in her family. The social role of Mibtahiah seems to be comparatively progressive, since the documents clearly indicate a juridical equalisation of men and women. The two conceptions of influential female characters present wealthy woman with potential in society. Thus, the positive attitude towards the two women is based on their wealth.

**'Welvarende vroue' in antieke tye: Die 'knap vrou' van Spreuke 31:10–31 en Mibtahiah van Elephantine.** Hierdie artikel vergelyk die anonieme 'knap vrou' van Spreuke 31 met Mibtahiah van Elephantine. Albei vroue word voorgelou as die welvarende, invloedryke en ekonomies suksesvolle eienaars van landgoedere. Albei letterkundige weergawes openbaar 'n positiewe ingesteldheid teenoor vroulike karakters, maar verteenwoordig twee uiteenlopende geslagskonsepte. Spreuke 31 beeld die 'knap vrou' uit as die ideale karakter wat die verskeie rolle van die vrou met gemak hanteer en voordeel uit wysheidsonderrig trek. Die 'knap vrou' is 'n navolgenswaardige model met wie iemand sou wou identifiseer. Die *Elephantine papyri* openbaar 'n verskillende perspektief op 'n ander welgestelde en invloedryke vrou, Mibtahiah, wat 'n landgoed erf en deur verdere aankope. Sy speel ook 'n leidende rol in haar familie. Dit blyk asof die sosiale rol wat Mibtahiah gespeel het betreklik progressief was omdat die geskryfte 'n duidelike juridiese gelykmaking van mans en vroue aandui. Hierdie twee konsepte van invloedryke vroulike karakters stel die vermoënde vrou met potensiaal in die samelewing voor. Dus is die positiewe houding teenoor die twee vroue op hulle welvarendheid gebaseer.

## Preliminary remarks

### On the subject

For quite a long time scholars have become aware that Proverbs is interrelated with the sapiential literature of Israel's and Judah's environment. This includes relations to Mesopotamian literature, but even stronger influences clearly show up from Egyptian literature.<sup>1</sup> Against this background I would like to address the question of whether some kind of analogy can be drawn between the female social roles of wealthy women. In particular, I intend to compare the "capable woman" of Proverbs 31 with the social role of Mibtahiah, who is known to us from contracts found amongst the ancient papyri of Elephantine, an estate located in the Nile on an island just after the first cataract close to Assuan in Egypt.

Whereas many scholars have dealt with the 'capable woman' of Proverbs (cf. particularly McCreesh 1985; Hausmann 1995; Brockmüller 2004; Yoder 2001), not much attention has been given to Mibtahiah yet.<sup>2</sup> Gender research has not put much emphasis on her, even though Erhard

1. For example, the commentary Meinhold (1991:37), concludes: *'Der klarste, direkte auswärtige Einfluss rührt ... von Ägypten her.'* For the relation of ancient Egyptian literature on Proverbs cf., for example the monograph of Wilke 2006; the summary by Schipper 2012:26–34 (see also examples and literature there), and Becking 2001:139ff, pointing at the Achiqar novel found in Elephantine, which was used as a school text there.

2. Most recently, Azzoni (2013:134–136).

Gerstenberger (2005) deduced that the documents from the ancient archive of Elephantine show that men and women held surprisingly equal positions compared to the social roles in other societies at that time.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this article intends to have a closer look at the portraits of these women and to compare their social roles as developed in the different texts.

Both women, the ‘capable woman’ of Proverbs and Mibtahiah of Elephantine, appear to have a higher position in the social hierarchy, even when compared to male counterparts. These similar and surprisingly high social statuses make them comparable to one another. In addition, both women own property, they control large households, and they possess their own money, which they could spend autonomously according to their own ideas. Furthermore, they act as traders. In doing this they obtain a responsible social position, hence taking responsibility not only within their household, but even beyond it in various social realms.

## On the approach

The analogy will begin by comparing the conceptions of female roles as they arise from the sources and discussing these as impressions of gender issues. This means that social portraits as presented in the sources will be focused on. When talking about an ancient document, the text is treated as a perception of life as it is documented in the texts. A text delineates a particular worldview or, taking up a modern term, creates its own model of social reality.

Such an approach of reading a text as an indication of social roles within its presentation of reality means in general to distinguish its inherent concept of world from reality itself. A literary entity is a construction of reality.<sup>4</sup> It is not merely a more or less true or reliable picture of reality itself. Rather, the portrait of reality, and hence the conception of social roles, is generated from a particular perspective with its own ideological presuppositions and social, cultural and maybe even theological values. Even legal documents, such as the contracts that include Mibtahiah of Elephantine, generate social and gender roles, for instance a particular equitability of genders.

The conception of life generates a certain meaning that emerges from an interpretation of circumstances in life. It is a certain evaluation of various processes and experiences that result in a reasoning about ‘good and evil’, which is about positive or negative encounters. Such a process of perception links various aspects and interprets them whilst inaugurating a complete worldview.

## Remarks on comparison

From the methodological remarks it follows that this article will not regard the two wealthy women being compared

as representations of the real social world. Instead, it will compare two different perceptions of social roles, particularly social roles of two women taking social responsibility.

First of all, the social portrait of the anonymous woman in Proverbs 31 will be presented. Secondly, the social role of Mibtahiah will be analysed. Finally, some conclusions comparing the distinct social roles and the social portraits of both characters will be drawn.

## The ‘capable woman’ in Proverbs 31:10–31

### Observations on the form of the passage

Usually, the passage Proverbs 31:10–31 is treated under the heading ‘the virtuous wife’. Such a characterisation originates from the beginning of the passage where an anonymous woman is characterised as *אִשָּׁה יָרֵאָה*, that is a ‘capable woman’. Taken for itself, the term *יָרֵאָה* (‘capable’ or the like) can be applied to various issues for which skilful talent is needed. Whilst the term itself is open to divergent meanings,<sup>5</sup> the context fixes a particular interpretation. Also, the word pair *אִשָּׁה יָרֵאָה* is undetermined at first sight and regards the woman as a prudent, skilful and caretaking character in a general way. Thus, the heading is not a portrait from social reality, but some kind of model of the female gender role that should be unfolded subsequently, including a certain social function. As Arnd Meinhold (1991) estimates:

Die Tüchtigkeit der Frau ‘schließt [...] Zuverlässigkeit und Güte (V. 11f.), gekonntes wirtschaftliches Management in der häuslichen Wirtschaft (V. 13–18), handwerkliches Geschick gepaart mit mitmenschlicher Zugewandtheit (V. 19f.), Voraussicht, Kalkulation und Zuversicht, von denen auch andere Gewinn haben (V. 21–25), und verständige, gütige Leitungstätigkeit (V. 26f.) ein’. [The capability of the woman ‘includes [...] reliability and benevolence (v. 11ff.), skilful economic management in the domestic economy (v. 13–18), technical skills coupled with caring attitude (v. 19ff.), foresight, calculation and confidence, which also other people will profit of (v. 21–25), and sensible, benevolent leadership (v.26ff.).’] (p. 522)<sup>6</sup>

The poem about the woman is presented in the form of an acrostic, which is a kind of artistic and artificial poetic structure.<sup>7</sup> Each Hebrew letter of the alphabet ushers in a sentence about the behaviour of the woman, either positive or negative. Whilst the logical flow of the arguments may sometimes be dismissed, the order of the letters is maintained until the end. The sentences follow each other by means of catchwords. A frame that describes the admirable attitudes of the woman (v. 10, 29–31; especially *אִשָּׁה יָרֵאָה* in v. 10, 29) keeps the material together. All in all, a world of meaning presents a peculiar appreciation of the female protagonist.

3. See Gerstenberger (2005:108), who states that there is an ‘*erstaunlich gleichwertige Positionen von Frau und Mann in der damaligen Jahwe-Gesellschaft*’ [surprisingly equivalent positions of women and men in the Yahweh society] in ancient Egypt.

4. Referring to the model of cognitive sociology in general, cf. the approach of Schütz and Luckmann (1979:133–154), and Berger and Luckmann (1997:157–174).

5. See the proposals mentioned by Walke (2005:520ff.).

6. Cf. also the characterisation by Brockmüller (2004:72) as well as Müllner (2006:113): ‘*Frau der Stärke*’ [woman of strength].

7. For further acrostics, cf. Psalms 9; 10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145; Lamentations 1–4 as well as partly in Proverbs 24:1–6 and Nahum 1:2–8.

The portrait of the 'capable woman' unfolds a sincere appreciation of her model behaviour. The main target is a positive evaluation. How valuable she behaves, becomes clear in verse 10 already, which estimates that 'she is far more precious than jewels (or, maybe better, corals)'. Even more, she appears as a figure with power, strength (עֹז in v. 25; cf. v. 17) and dignity (הִנָּח in v. 25).<sup>8</sup>

Since the poem does not point to any particular person with an individual shaping, Proverbs 31:10 and the following presents a general portrait of a *certain type of woman*. The densely formulated characterisation amalgamates all potential actions and attitudes that may typically be ascribed to such a female character. Hence, the poem in Proverbs 31:10–31 presents an *ideal portrait of the role* of a woman.

### Exegetical observations on the role of the woman in Proverbs 31:10–31

The 'capable woman' does not only refer to a certain gender role as far as she is introduced as a person active in trade business. Three verses mention such a duty in particular (√סחר in v. 14, 18; תַּמְכֹּר in v. 24).<sup>9</sup> Verse 24 presents her as a woman producing and selling fabrics. Two items are mentioned: firstly, a belt, which might have been manufactured from linen or leather<sup>10</sup> that was used for keeping clothes in their right place and, secondly, silk production (√סָדַן),<sup>11</sup> with reference especially to producing and selling. The proceeds of selling constitute the profit of trading.

A further object of trading appears in verse 14, which reflects on the provision of food. Since basic food had to be supplied by local agriculture (cf. v. 13, 16, 19), verse 14 applies to imported articles, such as luxury products.

Due to the fact that domestic agriculture constituted the basic structure for trading, Proverbs 31 implies that the farm must have been quite large to produce all the food for the local farmers and to produce a surplus for trading. In other words, the woman leads a kind of extended farm.

According to verse 13, she buys (דָּרַשׁ, verbally seeks) wool and flax in order to produce (עָשָׂה) clothes of these items. She spins yarn and makes clothes from it (v. 19). Such clothes are aimed at warming people in cold winter days (v. 21). The products mentioned in verse 13 are not just made into woollen clothes (v. 21), but also into blankets (v. 22).<sup>12</sup> Scarlet is used here to give wool a red colour (שָׁנִים; cf. v. 22: אֶרְגָּמָן – purple).

8. For a similar dignity nowadays, demonstrated by the 'Mamas Africa', cf. Du Plessis (2013). For comparison, also see Sinnott (2012).

9. Cf. Willi-Plein (2001:417): 'Import- und Exportfirma im Überseehandel' [import and export company in overseas trade]. Brockmüller (2004:166f.) points to production, especially for trading.

10. Cf. Jeremiah 13:1: linen, and 2 Kings 1:8: leather. Usually, a belt was used for reaping clothes and transportation of items.

11. According to Meinhold (1991:527), the word means 'Atlasseide' [Atlas silk] and probably originated as an Egyptian loan word. Another example of it can be found in Isaiah 3:23.

12. Willi-Plein (2001:421ff.) assumes that the term resembles a thick and heavy blanket, or the carpets that were also used as covers of open windows in winter times, especially whilst snow fell.

Since this colour was very expensive, it conveys the prosperity of the woman (and of her household, of course).<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the capable woman sees to it that there is sufficient food and supplies for her family as well as for her servants (v. 15b, c).<sup>14</sup> With this strategy, she becomes the manager of a small family enterprise.<sup>15</sup>

The processes mentioned in Proverbs 31 and the verbs used to describe them present the woman as both organising the farm and working on it. On the one hand, she is responsible for coordinating the processes on the farm, and on the other hand, she also works with her hands, like the verbs in active voice demonstrate (cf. for example v. 22: עָשָׂה-הָיָה; v. 13: וַתַּעַשׂ).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, her hands (v. 19a, 20b), and especially the palm of her hands (v. 13b, 16b, 19b, 20a), are explicitly mentioned. The role of the capable woman is therefore a double one: organising and working.

An additional aspect of farming comes in verse 16: the woman buys farmland (v. 16a) to plant a vineyard on it (v. 16b). The process stresses her role as a trading agent, since she is able to do so due to the revenues that she generates herself (√לָקַח).<sup>17</sup> The portrait of the woman presents her as a rich person with her own estate, which she is able to extend as far as her financial potential allows.

According to verse 18, she makes a profit (טוֹב).<sup>18</sup> The poem ends with pointing to her leadership,<sup>19</sup> since she acts as overseer (√צָפַח in v. 27)<sup>20</sup> and does so in a considerate way, watching and leading the farm. These elements of the poem clearly stress the role as a trading character with responsibility related to financial matters. In such a role, the wealthy capable woman exceeds the typical ancient female role with these attributes.

However, it comes as no surprise that these characteristics are primarily linked to another issue, since they show the

13. Cf. Exodus 25:4, Judges 8:26; 2 Samuel 1:24; Isaiah 1:18; Jeremiah 4:30; Ezekiel 27:7; see Waltke 2005:530. Wealth is also indicated by the stuff of clothes: שֵׁשׁ (linen) is as precious as silk, according to Exodus 16:13, and has to be imported from Egypt, according to Ezekiel 27:7. The Turban of the high priest is made of the same material (cf. Ex 16:10; 28:39; 39:27ff.). The Septuagint (LXX) translates it with βύσσος; another precious piece.

14. Verse 15c might be regarded as a gloss transferred from Proverbs 27:27. The parallel structure as well as the doublet in subject (the house, לְבֵיתָהּ) make the third element superfluous. Furthermore, the relation and interpretation of הֵק (measure) is difficult, so that the proposal of the apparatus of BHS 'dl (gl)' makes sense to follow; also see Meinhold (1991:524).

15. Cf. Willi-Plein (2001:417): 'Führung eines landwirtschaftlichen Großshaushalts' [management of a large agricultural estate].

16. Brockmüller (2004:106ff., 156) assumes that the verb עָשָׂה and terms of working are a guiding principle in Proverbs 31.

17. Cf. the peculiar translation of Meinhold (1991:520), who makes the process quite clear: 'vom Ertrag ihrer Handflächen pflanzt sie einen Weinberg' [from the proceeds of their palms she plants a vineyard]. According to Willi-Plein (2001:420), this means that she cultivates her own crops.

18. The meaning of the verb טָעַם includes to taste as well as to prove; see Proverbs 3:14.

19. Cf. Meinhold (1991:529), who calls it 'Leitung des häuslichen Anwesens' [management of the domestic property]; and Müllner (2006:113): 'Leitung eines Betriebes' [management of a business].

20. May we read the female participate as an allusion to the Greek term σοφία (see Brockmüller 2004:178ff.; Georges-Braunwarth 2002)? If that holds true, one could find a reception of personified wisdom (see further below n. 27).

sapience with which the woman runs the household and the farm. She acts with wisdom and teaches kindness (חַוְרַת-חֶסֶד in v. 26). This final appraisal presents the ‘capable woman’ as a figure that fulfils the main ideal of a wise woman<sup>21</sup> who is even more than that: not only wise, but also rich and capable. Her wisdom works as the source of her success and her benefits. Thus, the portrait of the wise woman at the same time meets the demands of wisdom.

The overall positive evaluation of the woman goes along with more favourable attitudes throughout the poem. Verse 13 presents her as exerting much effort and taking joy whilst working. Work is so joyful that she works all the time – even late at night and early in the morning (v. 15a, 18b),<sup>22</sup> all the days of her life (v. 12b). She works diligently without pause (v. 13b, 16b) and achieves financial success. For sure, the portrait is not meant to reflect a real picture of work, but comes as an ideal portrait of a capable and responsible woman, active in trade and economy, owning an estate and making decisions of her own.

Verse 20 pushes the ideal a bit further still, since the woman also acts generously by being benevolent to poor and miserable people (אֲבָיָה and אֲבָיָה). Both terms recall the typical terminology found in Psalms,<sup>23</sup> which characterises people who live at the edge of society and who spend their lives under quite difficult circumstances. Even more than that, the terms ‘poor’ (אֲבָיָה) and ‘miserable’ (אֲבָיָה) may even characterise people with desperate attitudes towards life.<sup>24</sup>

Such an attitude does not fit the ‘capable woman’, who is confident about the future (v. 25b). Her mood is described as: ‘she laughs at the day to come’. This very rarely used metaphor expresses strong expectations that lucky times will come. The woman’s social position, as well as her habits and her way of life give her reason to have such confidence.

Particular theological evaluations characteristic of wisdom theology sketch the picture of the ideal woman. Especially verse 27b stresses that she does not belong amongst the lazy ones (אֲבָיָה). Laziness (v. 27: אֲבָיָה)<sup>25</sup> is one of the attitudes that qualify fools and evildoers according to sapiential estimations of a human way of life (cf. for example Pr 13:4; 19:15, 24; 20:4; 24:30–34; 26:13–16).

The opposite is true for the wise woman, who spends her life as a righteous person and who seeks to fulfil God’s will all the time. Verse 30 clearly expresses her attitude towards life, which reads that she is living in fear of God (אֵת-יְהוָה יִרְאֶה). In sapiential literature, the fear of God qualifies a

21. See Müller (2006:115), who regards her as a didactic figure who represents wisdom. Similarly, see Sæbø (2012:384).

22. Waltke (2005:523–526ff.), takes these remarks figuratively as pointing to her prosperity.

23. Cf. for example Psalm 9:19; 35:10; 72:4, 12; 109:16, 22, 31; see Whybray (1989).

24. Cf. Sticher (2002:304–324); Seybold (2003:274–276).

25. A ‘lazy one’ is regarded as someone spending his or her life in circumstances of need, that is he or she is poor (opposite to richness and abundance of a diligent wise one); cf. Freuling (2004:41–50).

pious life: ‘The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge’ (Pr 1:7; cf. Pr 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; also see Pr 3:6; 14:2, 26ff.; 15:33; 16:6; 22:4; 23:17; Ps 111:10; Job 28:28). Hence, fear of God is foundational to a life guided by a positive attitude to all aspects of life. The capable woman reaches out for such a way of life. According to wisdom theology, *her economic success verifies her religious habits: ‘Her works praise her in the city gates’* (Pr 31:31).

Her sense of life is expressed by the description of the woman’s possession of wisdom (חֵכְמָה) and teaching of Torah (תּוֹרָה). Both terms in verse 26 also express fundamental values of the sapiential concept of order, which provides structure for a human way of acting and fate.<sup>26</sup> As long as the wise woman participates in these values, she acts as an example by leading a righteous life. She encourages people to lead a morally and socially successful life like herself. Not only has the female world regarded her highly – the male world also reacts with respect to her attitude (cf. v. 28: ‘her sons and husband praise her’).

The ‘capable woman’ participates in values that are usually applied to men. Since she is characterised in such a way, she is put in a somewhat equal position to her male associates. Proverbs offers some examples of well-educated women. One might compare the teaching of King Lemuel’s mother in Proverbs 31:1, or the advice of the mother in Proverbs 1:8 and 6:20, or the presentation of madam wisdom in Proverbs 1–9.<sup>27</sup> However, all in all, women are rarely portrayed as possessing goods and experiencing financial welfare.

The ‘capable woman’ in Proverbs 31 attracts attention, because she incorporates various roles. On the one hand, she takes a typical female role when she helps with farming. On the other hand, she takes a predominantly male role as far as she is active in trading and taking responsibility for the farm as the one who runs it. According to the presentation of the text, she belongs to those few families who have material wealth due to trading. Even more, she acts as an agent of sapiential values. All in all, the portrait of the capable woman incorporates various roles.<sup>28</sup> The result is an *ideal picture that offers a positive evaluation of the woman with manifold spheres of successful activities* that result from the fact that she follows wisdom.

Such a portrait does not agree with the general social status of a woman in ancient times – neither in Yehud, nor in the ancient Near East. The presentation of the woman establishes

26. Also see Brockmüller (2004:197–200), who regards wisdom as a concept of life.

27. In Proverbs 1–9, the woman acts like a character personifying wisdom. In terms of intratextual relations within the entire book of Proverbs, this character might be related to Proverbs 31. The term נְזִיפָה in Proverbs 31:27 supports such a reading (see above n. 20); see explicitly Fuhs (2001:388), who regards the woman as ‘Verkörperung der personhaften Weisheit’ [incarnation of the person-related wisdom]). Proverbs 31:10–31: ‘ist gewissermaßen die Antwort auf den Selbstpreis der Weisheit in 8 und auf ihre Einladung zum Bankett in 9<sup>1–6</sup> [is in a sense the answer to the self praise of wisdom in chapter 8 and on her invitation to the banquet in 9<sup>1–6</sup>]. See also McCreech (1985), Camp (1985:186–208), Maier (1995:14–22), Wilke (2006:279) and Tan (2008:82) for a similar evaluation. On the comparison, also see Fox (2009:908ff.).

28. According to Brockmüller (2004:204ff., 285), the woman incorporates two roles: the role of a housewife and the figure as a metaphor of wisdom. Even more, Waltke (2005:520) interprets her as ‘a role model for all Israel for all time’ (see also Hausmann 1995:262–266).

a model as it was perceived by a certain worldview that favoured an enhanced female status. Of course it might be appealing to ask if such a model was a realistic or, at least, a potential one.<sup>29</sup> The conception is nevertheless remarkable and needs to be recognised on its own as a contribution to ancient Jewish gender roles from the perspective of a particular conception of worldview.

## Mibtahiah of Elephantine

In the papyri of Elephantine we meet another rich woman with an influential position. For sure, the papyri reveal some Jewish women as fulfilling various roles. This article focuses on Mibtahiah, a Jewish woman whom we know from contracts found in a particular family archive (TAD B.2.1–2.11).

Even at first sight, it is quite clear that such contracts vary in genus from the poem in Proverbs 31, but not only in terms of formal matters. The Elephantine documents do not so much generate an ideal picture of a rich woman, but rather present particular arrangements for certain affairs to come. The legal documents regarding Mibtahiah include certificates of marriage.<sup>30</sup> As such, they stipulate how to treat property and estate. The documents provide a much more realistic and less construed social portrait. The remarkable circumstance found within these documents is that a woman is an owner of the estate.

## The documents of the Jewish settlement in Elephantine

In the Jewish settlement in Elephantine, papyri from the Achaemenid period, originating from the 5th century BC, were found. Most of the documents<sup>31</sup> contain a precise date of writing so that there is a comparatively reliable notion about the time around, which they were written. The documents that include Mibtahiah originate from somewhere between 460 and 410 BC. The contracts present two generations of the family. Amongst those, Mibtahiah belongs to the elder generation. The archive also contains documents of the previous generation, including Mibtahiah's father, called Maaseiah (TAD B2.1 from 471 BC and B2.2 from 464 BC).<sup>32</sup> These documents give witness to particular circumstances on the Nile Island with its ancient Jewish society (cf. Villeneuve 2009).

The archive was discovered at the end of the 19th century. Some of the first documents were published by Sayce and Cowley (1906). Further editions, including more papyri, followed.<sup>33</sup> The most relevant bilingual edition, including all known Elephantine papyri and ostraca, was completed by

29. As such, Willi-Plein (2001:415–425), reads the passage as resembling the everyday life of a wealthy family in Palestine in the Persian Period; similarly, Fox (2009:912–916). See further examples referred by Walke (2005:515–520).

30. See in detail Azzoni (2013).

31. Excluding those documents that are only fragmentarily preserved.

32. The dating follows Porten and Yardeni (1989:15).

33. First edition: Sachau (1911) and Ungnad (1911); second edition (first with English translation): Cowley (1919 and 1923); some time later, the edition of Kraeling (1953). See also the papyri edited in CIS (*Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*: 1881; 1907).

Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni and published between 1986 and 2001 (documents cited under TAD).<sup>34</sup> These editions provide us with rich material worth reading and discussing in detail to gain first-hand information about the daily life of the Jewish people of Elephantine in the 5th century. The documents help us to construct a vivid picture of the family and their estate, which lasted for more than half a century.

## The Jewish settlement in Elephantine

The Jewish settlement in Elephantine was a military colony.<sup>35</sup> Jewish settlers and their families spent their lives in the garrison serving Persian interests. In Elephantine, the Jews formed a minority, a diaspora.<sup>36</sup> They lived amongst people with divergent nationalities, customs and beliefs. From the documents it is quite obvious that the people in Elephantine were settled in a disorganised manner. There were no clearly delineated districts due to whatever preference, although some Jews lived in adjacent houses. Even intermarriage was a common practice. Researchers have deduced this from the documents that have been discovered, since they either mention the national origin of a person (e.g. Jew or Aramean), or include an inflection within a particular name that reveals the individual's origin (e.g. for Jews some documents included a theophoric ending to the name, like -ياهو).

Since the documents do not tell us much about conflicts in interaction, we need to assume that living as a multi-cultural society was more or less relaxed.<sup>37</sup> According to the evaluation of Anke Joisten-Pruschke in her 2008 dissertation 'Das religiöse Leben der Juden von Elephantine in der Achämenidenzeit':

Das enge Zusammenleben, die berufliche Zusammenarbeit, der wirtschaftliche und soziale Kontakt unterschiedlicher Nationalitäten vermitteln für Elephantine das Bild eines multinationalen Mikrokosmos. [*The close association, the professional cooperation, the economic and social contact of different nationalities convey the image of a multinational microcosm for Elephantine.*] (p. 86)<sup>38</sup>

As a part of this multi-national and multi-cultural society, the Jews lived their way of life. They practiced their own religious customs and kept to their traditions and laws, like the celebration of the Passover and keeping the Sabbath day (cf. Frey 1999:174–176). On the island, there was a Temple

34. TAD: Porten and Yardeni (1986–2001); see also the recent complete English edition by Porten et al. (2011).

35. For elaboration, see the monographs by Porten (1968:3–186) and Becking (2001).

36. A diaspora of Jewish people exiled in Egypt is reflected in Jeremiah 41:16–18 and 2 Kings 25:22–26. Also see critiques on Jews who were moved to Egypt in Jeremiah 42–44, interpreted as punishment through exile.

37. A different estimation might be drawn from the destruction of the first temple of Yahu in Elephantine. The priests of Khnum are accused of the destruction. However, since further conflicts between Jews and the Khnum priests are not known, there are good reasons to doubt the historical reliability of such an accusation. Therefore, it is better to regard it as an ideological matter.

38. Similarly Azzoni (2013:5ff.). Whereas most scholars regard the Jewish settlement of Elephantine as somewhat special with regard to regulations and practices, Kratz (2006:260) gives a divergent estimation: 'Das ägyptische Judentum dürfte dem historischen Israel der [...] nachexilischen Zeit in Palästina sehr viel näher gestanden haben als das biblische' [The Egyptian Judaism likely had been much closer to the historical Israel of the [...] post-exilic period in Palestine than the biblical one].

dedicated to Yahu (*yhw* / יהו),<sup>39</sup> that is, there was a temple of Yahweh where offerings could be slaughtered (just like in the Jerusalem temple) and the cult could be performed adequately.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, due to the multi-faced mixture in society, the question of identity is a matter of debate – at least in Jewish circles. We can deduce such discussions from particular identity markers found in the papyri. There are quite a number of references to the self-designation ‘Jew’. The Jews stay in touch with their homeland Judah and the Jerusalem temple through letters going to and from. The vivid exchange concerns individual issues as well as official affairs.

Next to the Yahu temple there lived a wealthy family that we know quite well from the papyri. Their estate included several houses. Quite a number of servants belonged to them. According to the testimony of the family archive documents in the papyri, we know three to four generations of that particular family. The documents tell us about the property and contracts involving the entire family. Mibtahiah is one of the important and influential persons who are variously mentioned in the documents.

### The status and role of Mibtahiah

Mibtahiah (מבטחיה) had a leading role within her family. It is quite sure that she was the head of the house and of the estate. The documents provide information about Mibtahiah’s family relations and property circumstances.

#### Family relations

Mibtahiah belonged to the house and family of Mahseiah ben Yedoniah. Her father was an Aramean of Syene, that is the detachment of Warizat (וריצת).<sup>41</sup> He was working as an inspector of the fortress of Elephantine (הנדז הוייה בברית).<sup>42</sup> Mahseiah owned some houses in Elephantine. Mibtahiah inherited one of those – the same house that her father bought from Meshullam ben Zaccur ben Atar (who also was an Aramean of Syene). Due to the professional engagement of the father, the family was wealthy and the various members of the family benefited from this.

In 460 BC, Mibtahiah married her first (Jewish) husband, Yezaniah ben Uriah.<sup>43</sup> We do not know much about his property.

He shared Mibtahiah’s house, but only as a usufruct, not as an owner. Subsequent documents (e.g. TAD B2.7 = Cowley 13, 446 BC) do not include his name anymore, so we may assume that he had died in the meantime.<sup>44</sup> The documents do not indicate whether children were born from that relationship. Anyway, some contracts potentially seem to include heirs (TAD B2.4 = Cowley 9, 460 BC).

Mibtahiah married for a second time to the socially well-established Egyptian Pia ben Pahi. The marriage date is unknown. Anyhow, the divorce document from 441 BC provides us with more information about her Egyptian husband. The document characterises him as the one who was responsible for the blueprint and the construction of the fortress Syene (TAD B2.8.3: builder / architect of Syene, the fortress). We may draw the conclusion that Mibtahiah married within her social class. However, somewhat surprisingly, she married a non-Jew<sup>45</sup> and became integrated into his conventions and traditions.

The marriage ended in divorce and a divorce document arranged the outcome of the process (B2.8).<sup>46</sup> The document does not mention any reason for the disintegration of the relationship. There have been speculations about the potential causes, for example a religious syncretism. Consequences might have been that the Jewish community did not accept Mibtahiah anymore due to her marriage with Pia. In order to regain acceptance amongst them, a divorce could have been regarded as a proper means (cf. Cowley 1919:45). Such an assumption is facilitated by the fact that the divorce document mentions the Egyptian goddess Sati (*sty* / סתי), who received an oath from Mibtahiah (cf. line 5). However, such an argument loses weight if one becomes aware that such an oath represents an ordinary judicial practice (cf. Joisten-Pruschke 2008:89ff.).<sup>47</sup> It does not necessarily need to point to real syncretistic customs, but might be read as a judicial term.

Mibtahiah’s third husband was the otherwise unknown Ashor ben Zeho.<sup>48</sup> There are two documents that mention him. The marriage contract between him and Mahseiah ben Yedoniah, Mibtahiah’s father (TAD B2.6 = Cowley 15), provides stipulations concerning the bride’s price and the dowry. The document originated from 441 BC, or shortly thereafter,<sup>49</sup> and gives scholars good reason to assume that Mibtahiah remarried shortly after her divorce.

39.The papyri know a temple of *yhw* / יהו (cf. TAD A3.3.1: בית יהו ביב). Yet, there are discussions as to whether other deities besides Yahweh were venerated there (cf. Knauf 2002:184ff.).

40.At least in the first temple, offerings were brought to Yahu, such as grain offerings, incense offerings and burnt offerings (TAD A4.7.21ff.; A4.8.21). Whether the cult was practiced in the same way as in the Second Temple is a matter of dispute. In the memorandum A4.9.4–11, Bagohi and Delajah give permission to reconstruct the temple based on the previous one. Yet, doubts have been raised as to whether burnt offerings were indeed offered, or whether only grain offerings and incense were approved (cf. Joisten-Pruschke 2008:69–71).

41.A detachment (*‘degel’*) was a military unit. In Elephantine, seven such units are known; cf. Porten (1968:28–35) and Joisten-Pruschke (2008:83ff.).

42.However, the antecedent term הנדז is somewhat insecure. The most relevant meaning will be ‘inspector of weights and measures’ or ‘inspector for the water supply’ (cf. Cowley 1923:39).

43.According to Porten and Yardeni (1989:15), she was 20 or 21 years old. Nutkowicz (2007:211) proposed a divergent dating of the marriage to 449 BC, but lacks a basis for that calculation.

44.According to the interpretation of Cowley (1923:44) and Becking (2001:136).

45.According to intermarriage practices in Elephantine, such a mixed ethnic identity within a family is not that unique; see further examples mentioned by Azzoni (2013:107–11).

46.Divorce follows the ordinary scheme in so far as it was declared in front of the congregation (עדה) using the phrase ‘I hate you’ (שנאתי) as a technical term expressing a desire of separation. In Elephantine, such a process could be initiated by either husband or wife (cf. Nutkowicz 2007:220; Azzoni 2013:64–68, 76–80). However, document B2.8 does not inform the reader about who initiated it in this case.

47.Another option comes from Azzoni (2013:110–121) when she concludes that it was ‘acceptable [...] for Judeans to address the local gods, Sati and Khnum’ (quotation 121).

48.According to Porten and Yardeni (1989:15) and Becking (2001:136), he was also an Egyptian; anyhow, proof is pure.

49.The papyrus does not indicate the date. The document may easily be put in a sequence with other contracts. Cowley (1923:44) proposes the date of 441 BC, whereas Joisten-Pruschke (2008:140) favours 439 BC. A third proposal comes from Porten and Yardeni (1989:15) who propose 458 or 445 BC.

Ashor ben Zeho is mentioned as Mibtahiah's husband in a second document from 420 BC (TAD B2.9 = Cowley 20). The document provides arrangements for the transfer of property to the sons of Mibtahiah and Ashor. Both parents seem to have already died when this document was written. Two sons from the marriage are known from the fact that their future economic status is arranged.

Mibtahiah herself appears for the last time in a document from 410 BC (TAD B2.11 = Cowley 28). The document regulates the division of her slaves between her sons, Yedoniah ben Natan and Mahseja ben Natan. The document was probably written close to her death.

### Economic situation

The documents present Mibtahiah as a rich woman with a high social status. The amount of wealth is reflected in the dowry given for her third marriage with Ashor ben Zeho: various fabrics (including particular measurements), luxurious clothes, a bronze mirror, an ivory box for cosmetics, several bronze vessels for the household, money, as well as a bed (TAD B2.6 = Cowley 15).<sup>50</sup> In case of divorce these personal items will remain her property. The documents protect Mibtahiah from falling into economic indigence. Such an intention is also present in the divorce document with Pia (B3.8). Although she lost some of the property that formerly belonged to both partners, a certain amount remained to guarantee that she would have property in the future and that she could be comfortable.

Mibtahiah inherited a house from her father that was located in a preferred area: next to one of the main streets of the fortress, the so-called 'Kings Street' (in Hebrew: שוק מלכא; TAD B3.4.8–10), adjacent to the temple of Yahu.<sup>51</sup> This house was registered in her name and she could do with it whatever she liked. This information touches on her potential disposition during her lifetime, as well as the possibility of an inheritance for her heirs. She solely owns the rights for this house in any regard.

Mibtahiah had her own slaves. The documents provide two names: Petosiri and Belo. Ownership was indicated by a Yod in Aramaic script burnt on their right arm to indicate that they belonged to Mibtahiah (B2.11 = Cowley 28). This practice was in line with ancient practices of giving slaves brand marks indicating their owner. In this case, it is remarkable that a woman had her own brand mark. Her slaves stood directly under her rule and she was the only one to make decisions about them – just like with her other property.

The wealthy status of Mibtahiah also becomes clear from a list of sponsors for the temple. The list dates to 419 BC<sup>52</sup> and

50. On the value and property, see Azzoni (2013:43–63).

51. Cf. the reconstruction provided by Joisten-Pruschke (2008:85), who gives more information: 'Rund um die Wohneinheit' [around the dwelling unit] there live 'der Ägypter Espemet, der Chwaresmier Dargamana, die Juden Hosea, Jezaniah und Konahiah, sowie der Aramäer Hazzul'.

52. The preserved part of the list just provides the date as 'in the fifth year'. If this refers to the fifth year of Darius II, it indicates the year 419 BC (cf. Cowley 1923:66).

mentions her in column 2 line 25 (Cowley 22; the document contains 7 columns altogether), as a sponsor who, like everyone else, gave 2 Shekels.<sup>53</sup>

The remarkable thing that becomes apparent from these legal documents is that the same juridical regulations applied to both men and women. Women and men are regarded as equal, so that both were equally treated as juridical persons established with the same rights. Mibtahiah even had rights that remained hers regardless of whether she was married or divorced. Her property belonged to her and stayed with her throughout her divergent marital statuses.

Concerning divorce, it is noteworthy that both spouses may ask for it and are treated equally throughout the process and in its outcome. The one who asked for divorce had to pay a higher price and lost what was common property during the marriage. The losing partner had to be otherwise compensated by the winner.

The equal treatment of women and men fits the Egyptian juridical equalisation of men and women (see Joisten-Pruschke 2008:116; Nutkowicz 2007:222, 225).<sup>54</sup> What is significant here is the fact that the Elephantine papyri indicate that the gender mainstreaming was expanded to Jewish families. This is not only true for Mibtahiah, but also for other Jewish women. The documents provide further examples, such as Yehoshima (cf. for example TAD B3.5; B3.10), who is presented in about the same way. Thus, Mibtahiah is not an exception, but rather an example of equalisation of women and men in the Elephantine papyri.

When one reads Mibtahiah as an example, the documents provide a portrait of a wealthy and responsible female character in a particular higher social position, with rights equal to the male figures. Such a conception of social statuses is quite remarkable.

If one compares this presentation to the female social role in Yehud during that same time, the social worldview in Elephantine turns out to be quite astonishing. Mibtahiah has influence in society given that she is regarded as an individual able to take decisions on her own, to enter into contracts, buy and sell items and work as a juridical character, just like a male companion.

## Conclusion: Two different gender conceptions

Although both women, the anonymous 'capable woman' of Proverbs 31 and Mibtahiah of Elephantine, are presented as wealthy occupiers of estates, busy in trading and masters of houses and servants, the two portraits present two divergent gender conceptions. Yet, both conceptions unfold

53. The purpose of the donation is not mentioned, but it seems too small to be regarded as a contribution for the reconstruction of the (second) temple (cf. Cowley 1923:66).

54. Azzoni (2013:27, 31) points to reciprocity in marriage documents testifying to a mutually equal relationship between men and women.

positive attitudes towards female characters and put them in a position of influence in their environment, which is subordinate to and dependent on them. Yet, the conceptions present differences in the female social and religious roles.

The construction of Proverbs 31 depicts the 'capable woman' as an ideal character who amalgamates various social female roles and benefits from acting according to the wisdom teachings. Her manifold achievements are recognised in order to build up a positive perception of such a multi-faced female figure. Still, the various roles remain within the realm of a typical female character, though an extraordinary multi-scaled figure. The wealthy status of the woman is due to economic success in agricultural production, handcraft and trading. When the surplus of trading is used to gain more revenue, there appears to be a strategy behind it. The superfluous earnings provide her with the possibility to buy non-local and luxurious goods, which she otherwise would not be able to get.

The conception presents her as someone who is wealthy due to land ownership. This insight can be gathered from the fact that she purchases luxurious goods as well as her charity towards poor people. The woman is set in a social position that gives her the potential to allow other people to participate therein to some extent. Even more, the conception found in Proverbs 31 characterises her according to sapiential ideas, presenting her as a wisdom teacher distinguished by fear of God and certainty in future hope. She even stands out with regard to her attitude in life and moral conduct. Her wealth ascribes success to such a strategy.

Such an ideal character is impressive for anyone who can recognise such a person. She emerges as a brilliant example to be imitated by anyone else. Since the conception includes various social roles, it unfolds a manifold offer to share one's identity with her. It invites women to take up at least some aspects of her role and to identify with her. Once such an identification occurs, the positive attitude of the capable woman is transferred to anyone else who identifies with her.

The Elephantine papyri reveal a divergent conception. Since these documents present contracts, their picture is much more realistic. The social role of Mibtahiah seems to be comparatively modern<sup>55</sup> and progressive, since the documents clearly indicate a juridical equalisation of men and women. The high social status of the woman guarantees her apparent affluence. Her family is well-established and she takes a leading role in that particular family. She inherits an estate and enlarges her domain through additional purchase. Even more, she is an owner of material capital, which gives her the opportunity to act in various regards. The role of a landowner and owner of a house puts her in a position in which she makes decisions. In addition, she takes responsibility for her servants and slaves, who are subordinate directly to her. She also makes her own decisions about her partner in life. In all this, she acts as a juridical person, established with her own rights equal to men in Egypt.

55.Cf. the estimation of Nutkowicz (2007:225): 'It is an indication of a woman's considerable freedom – she is entitled to express her feelings, will and choice. This clause of separation and its evidence of a modern open-mindedness is surprising.'

Compared to the 'capable woman' of Proverbs 31, Mibtahiah's role is a more active one, since she makes decisions in various regards, for instance economically, with regard to her estate and people in her environment. The gender conception presents her as an independent figure acting on her own and equal to men. The conception found in the Elephantine papyri presents a woman who has influence in society, more than the ideal character of Proverbs 31. The 'capable woman' is rather presented as a literary model of identification and imitation.

The two portraits of wealthy and influential women represent various conceptions. The difference might be due to the form of the literary body. On the one hand, there is an artificial poem and on the other hand there are contracts that regulate situations that occurred in real life. The social role in Proverbs is much more conservative and conventional, maybe presented from a male worldview. It is developed according to ideal attitudes of wisdom theology and its inherent gender concept. The conception of Elephantine allows more space and responsibility for female actions. It is influenced by social values of the Egyptian environment with its particular social female roles ascribing equal rights to men and women. This concept is then transferred to a Jewish woman as well. New female roles are integrated into the social worldview and this enlarges the traditional idea regarding the influence and power of women. Compared to the traditional Jewish Yehud, the new concept of Elephantine offers women more responsibility and independence in many social regards.

## A short epilogue

The two conceptions of influential female characters present wealthy women. The different estates of the two figures form the basis for their potentials and positions in society. The positive attitude towards the two women is based on their wealth.

On the other hand, it follows that both literary corpuses do not establish positive female roles for poor women. As often as poor women are mentioned in the texts, they take the roles of subordinate people. The conceptions do not recognise them as equals. In general, the conceptions discussed above do not integrate poor women. The conceptions do not provide an offer of positive identification to them. The sad story of this analysis is that poor women seemingly had a lesser chance to partake in the positive attitude towards women that is present in Proverbs 31 and in the Elephantine papyri. As far as this still seems to be the case in modern industrial countries, much has to be done with regard to the equality of men and women.

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