

Proverbs 31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 31. The words of King Lemuel, an oracle that his mother taught him. Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress. Let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more. Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

An excellent wife, who can find. She is far more precious than jewels. 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. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant. She brings her food from afar.

She rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household, and portions for her maidens. She considers a field and buys it. With the fruit of her hand she plants a vineyard. She dresses herself with strength, and makes her arms strong. She perceives 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 household are clothed in scarlet. She makes bed coverings for herself. 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 delivers sashes 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.

[2 : 19] Many women have done excellently, but you surpassed 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.

Chapter 31 represents the final collection of the book of Proverbs, concluding the book with the words of King Lemuel received from his mother, concerning the noble king and the wise wife. This is not just an appendix to the book of Proverbs. It draws together many of the themes that have been running throughout the whole. The concern to prepare the young prince for rule, and to prepare him to choose a wise woman, have been prominent throughout the whole text, and now they come to their condensed, final expression.

Proverbs began with the young man being taught by his father, and instructed not to forget the teaching of his mother. The book ends with the young man having left his father and mother, passing on the teaching that his mother once gave him, and sharing a poem of praise to the wise wife, the woman by which such a leader of his community would be elevated.

Some have argued that King Lemuel is only the source of the first nine verses of this chapter. However, that seems unlikely, as it would only attribute a small section to him, and would also leave the final poem of the book without attribution.

[3 : 36] We do not know who King Lemuel was. We should probably assume that he was some God-fearing king in the ancient Near East. He passes on the words of this chapter, but he is not actually the author of them.

Whether or not the words all originated with her, the words were taught to him by his mother.

Verses 2-9 concern the behaviour of a noble king. She begins by addressing him as her son, and then with the affectionate term as son of my womb, and then as son of my vows.

Perhaps in reference to vows that she had made to raise him up in the instruction of the Lord. As Lemuel's mother, she was very concerned about those to whom Lemuel gave his heart. The virility

and strength of a young man can often be devoted to unworthy women, and can lead him to his own destruction.

Lemuel needs to be on his guard. Such women could be his destruction, as for many kings before him, and many after. A great many kings have been led astray by their hearts and by their lusts. In the pursuit of unfaithful women, they have squandered their strengths and their riches. The most notable example of this, particularly as we read the book of Proverbs, is Solomon himself. We might also think here of characters like King Ahab, or of Herod, men whose wickedness was greatly compounded by their evil wives.

[4 : 49] It is good, as we see later in this chapter, for a man to give his strength to a woman, but he should give his strength to the wise wife, who will in turn strengthen him. A further danger, alongside strange women and many concubines, is that of a king who gives himself over to his appetites, particularly a king who gives himself to excesses of wine.

The resulting inebriation makes it difficult for such a king to exercise justice. He will pervert and forget the law, and he will fail to deliver justice to those to whom it is due.

It is not a bad thing to drink wine. Indeed, wisdom offers wine to her guests. The danger is that of drunkenness. Lemuel's mother sarcastically argues that if anyone has to be given excesses of wine, it should be to those who are dying, or in bitter distress.

They can drown their sorrows if they must, but it is not for a king to drink wine. This statement should not be taken seriously. It is almost certainly sarcastic. Lemuel is charged to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, and to stand up for the rights of those without resources.

The king is supposed to be the great advocate and defender of the poor. The lord is the protector of the widow and the fatherless, the stranger and the alien, and the king who rules in the name of the lord will have his throne established as he acts on behalf of these groups.

[6 : 06] Proverbs chapter 31, and the book of Proverbs as a whole, ends with a poem concerning the valorous wife. The Proverbs 31 woman has a reputation that precedes her.

If Helen of Troy was the face that launched a thousand ships, the Proverbs 31 woman might be the biblical figure who launched a myriad of women's Bible study series. She has been set forth as a standard for women to aspire to, and as a standard by which to judge them.

This can make it difficult for us to read this passage in its proper context. Proverbs chapter 31 isn't actually a text written primarily for women, but for men. It teaches the man to recognize the wise wife and to honor her as she is due.

These are the words of King Lemuel, but they're originally the words of his mother to him. This is an internalized lesson. It is also a lesson given by a mother concerning the woman that she desires for her son.

It's one of the places in scripture where we see the voice of a woman come to the fore, and it is a woman's teaching concerning a woman. We should also attend to the form of the teaching here.

[7 : 09] Although it's so frequently transposed into the form of command, it isn't actually given to us in that form. The rhetorical form of teaching is important. This text isn't command, it isn't even straightforwardly framed as persuasion.

It is rather a poem of praise to the figure of the wise wife, extolling her manifold virtues. It is praising that which is praiseworthy, a valorizing of the valuable, thereby instructing Lemuel as to what he needs to look for in a woman.

It comes at the very end of the book. It's not just some appended thoughts at the end. Oh, here's some miscellaneous stuff that didn't fit elsewhere. No, it sums up the larger message of the book. The book began with the young man under the teaching of his father and mother, and ends with the wise wife. A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife. This is a movement into maturity and it frames the whole book.

Here the book's interwoven themes of the young man's quest for love and the search for wisdom arrive at a poetic resolution in a climactic statement that unites them. The figure of Lady Wisdom, by whom God created the world, is incarnated, as it were, in the virtuous wife.

[8 : 16] We can see this as we look through the statements concerning the wise wife. The portrait reaches back to the beginning of Proverbs and the portrait of wisdom. Like Lady Wisdom, the excellent wife's value is far above jewels, as we see in chapter 3 verse 15.

She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Or in chapter 8 verse 11, for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her. Like Lady Wisdom in her invitation to the simple in chapter 9, the excellent wife offers food. The excellent wife also brings gain, as we see in verse 11 here, which is like wisdom in chapter 3 verse 14.

For the gain from her is better than gain from silver, and her profit better than gold. Wisdom begins from the fear of the Lord, which is precisely what animates the excellent wife.

The poem in question is a heroic poem. It speaks of the woman as a valorous woman, a woman of courage and might, taking a form that may have been used more typically for male heroes.

[9 : 16] It applies it to a good wife in her running of her household. In praising the wise woman, it also adopts the language and the imagery of the heroic military champion. The woman is characterised by strength in verses 17 and 25.

She gets plunder in verse 11 and pray in verse 15 for her family. She girds herself with strength in verse 17, like a warrior heading out to battle. She rejoices and is celebrated like a hero returning from a great victory.

She's fearless and confident in the face of the future. She's the powerful wise woman who, through the prudent ruling of her household, brings prosperity and joy to her husband and family, and is honoured by all who know her.

Beauty and charm are deceitful and fleeting, yet this woman is marked out by enduring faithfulness and determined action. The language of the valorous woman is also found in Ruth chapter 3 verse 11, and this poem has been connected with the character of Ruth by some.

The poem is structured in 22 statements. The statements of the poem are an alphabetical acrostic, in which the entire book is summed up in the complete woman. She covers all of the bases from Aleph to Tav.

[10 : 25] The placement of this passage at the end of the book is not accidental. It's not an awkward appending of excess material to the conclusion of the collection. It brings the underlying themes of the book to full and true resolution.

It's the capstone of the whole book. The quest for wisdom has been compared to the quest for a woman, and the young man's relationship with particular women has been connected to his quest for wisdom or for folly.

Wisdom and folly were juxtaposed in chapter 9 as two women providing invitations to simple young men. Here at the end of the book, the quest for wisdom and the quest for a particular woman with whom to spend his life are brought together in the figure of the wise wife, who in many ways incarnates wisdom.

Wisdom is tied to love for and faithfulness to one's wife. A crucial aspect of wisdom is guarding oneself from sexual temptation. We can all think of tragic examples of ways in which people have been led astray by their loves and their lusts, drawn to reject wisdom because they hate correction and reproof, yet love folly and justifying their sin.

This is one reason why the choice of a marriage partner is so important. The choice of someone to commit ourselves to in love is the choice of someone to direct and shape our values and our direction in life, to determine what we treat as a matter of first importance and those things to which we give little regard.

[11 : 45] There are few things that can be more devastatingly compromising of a person than the choice of a wicked or a foolish marriage partner. This has been a recurring theme throughout the Proverbs.

If you are married, you have a position of immense influence over and responsibility for the loves, the values and the life direction of your spouse, a power that can be wielded for incredible good or evil.

If you are unmarried, you should choose your partner with the utmost of care. If they are not a wise person, you may live your entire life fighting against the gravitational pull of their folly. Wisdom is to be pursued and sought out, and we must love and cleave to her.

When we attend to this image, it might seem strange, at least when compared to our cultural notions of wisdom. In our culture, wisdom tends to be considered in terms of knowledge, intelligence and the sharpness of a person's mind.

Wisdom is primarily pursued by using our brains. However, the biblical understanding of the pursuit of wisdom begins in the heart. True wisdom is the guarding and mastering of one's heart and loves.

[12 : 46] True wisdom is also not something that we create in ourselves, but something that must be sought out from and given by God. The virtuous woman described here, then, is another image of Lady Wisdom, but a characterisation of the actual wife that the young man must seek.

The wife performs in the life of her household what the great Lady Wisdom performs in the creation at large. In such a woman, then, the young man's quest for wisdom and his quest for a wife are resolved into a unified image.

The woman described here is a woman who can be trusted by her husband, trusted to be a source of prudent and righteous counsel, someone who will run her household with wisdom and strength, and to be someone who will direct his heart towards things that are worthy of his love.

The woman of Proverbs chapter 31 is idealised, and though we shouldn't struggle to see traits of actual women we know in her, we should be careful about employing her as a critical measure on actual women.

However, she does reveal the part that all women are given to play in the work of Lady Wisdom. This passage also reveals the great reward enjoyed by the wise man who was crowned by such a wife.

[13 : 52] Beauty is often valued and praised in scripture, but here it is downplayed in favour of other traits. The manner and the content of the characterisation of the woman here are instructive for us in considering the true strength of women as it is recognised and celebrated by scripture.

This is a portrait that explicitly resists the reduction of women to the passivity of beauty, as we see in verse 30. It focuses rather upon the prudence, the economy, the wisdom, the providence, the faith, the productivity and the industry of their activity.

More striking still, as Peter Lightheart observes, The woman's work is domestic, economic, craft work, and yet the poem celebrates it in heroic terms. A heroic poem for someone engaged in domestic labour is remarkable in the ancient world and shows something of how God regards the work of women.

The great battle of the world is between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, not the seed of the man. In their care for their households, wise women are on the front lines of God's holy war.

Our failure to see the heroism and the strength of such a diligent and active woman is a failure to see the world as God does. The strength of such a woman is not that of the conformity to more typical male forms of strength, but rather is a reflection of the work of Lady Wisdom within the wife's own world of activity.

[15 : 10] This is also praise of a wise woman given by another wise woman. If these are truly the words of King Lemuel's mother, she is training her son to see in a woman what she as a wiser older woman perceives to be admirable in her sex.

This is quite the opposite of the reduction of a woman to what she is in the eyes of men. Rather, it is an encouragement given by a woman to a man to help him to see women differently. The woman here is not in competition with her husband.

Rather, she works in unity with her husband, and by each spouse's faithful use of their strength, the other is built up and glorified. By virtue of her diligence and providence in her household, she enables her husband to enjoy high social standing and a reputation in the society that he uses to strengthen her in her work and to build up her reputation among the people.

She labours on behalf of her children, and her children rise up and praise her. This is a vision of a household where all members are working for the sake of each other and are not just out selfishly to seek their own gain.

Many contemporary Christians reading this passage have been preoccupied with the question of whether the woman here is going out to work in the workplace or whether she is staying at home. This is a very wrong-headed question to ask, because the home is the workplace, it's the centre of activity, it's her realm that is extending out into the world.

[16 : 29] She does all that she does as a wife and a mother and a manager of her own household, not as an individual careerist. She is not working for a boss or another's household.

The ideal here is one of unalienated labour, where the woman is doing her work to build up her own home, where she is an active participant in the economy and the wider society, but does not have to leave the world of her household in order to participate in it.

Obviously this would not be attainable for everyone in that ancient society, but in our own society it may be even less so, as the home and the economy have been substantially torn away from each other, leaving women with the choice of engaging in fungible, alienated labour in the workplace, or forming their own households in a way that is detached from the wider society.

In the figure of the wise woman here we see those two worlds brought together, perhaps in a way that functions as an indictment on us. The unveiling of the wise woman at this point should serve as something of an epiphany, a disclosure of a deep truth.

The creative work of wisdom in chapter 8 manifested in the wise wife is not a set of rules for women, but a vision of something glorious that should inspire us. The woman here is not just a young woman, she is a woman who has matured into glory.

[17:42] She isn't a set of commands or a benchmark to discourage, but a vision to inspire. The wise man praises her and the wise woman emulates her. She reveals a sort of power of women, a power to inspire and move men towards that which is good, a power to glorify, a power to integrate things into a unified and glorious world, a power to manifest the work of wisdom herself.

The woman is the glory of the man as Paul talks about it. Wisdom has built her house and the wise woman builds her house also. We are supposed to see the one in the other. The summons of wisdom herself is heard by the man who has his eyes opened to this wise wife.

A question to consider. What are the different realms of activity that the wise wife is described as engaging in in the poem concerning her here?