

The Woman of Worth: Impressions of Proverbs 31:10-31

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I AM NEITHER A SCHOLAR OF THE HEBREW BIBLE nor a theologian, yet very occasionally some unsuspecting soul asks me to preach or speak about the Bible. In 1994 I substituted one Sunday for a Congregationalist friend, who asked me to preach using the Protestant lectionary passages for that day. To my great surprise, the Hebrew Bible text was the famous "Valiant Woman" section which concludes the Book of Proverbs. I laughed, because I was unaware that anyone, especially liberal Protestants, ever read Proverbs anymore.

As I undertook my research, however, I began to recognize how very rich and how sadly misunderstood this passage is. If it is not overlooked, it is misconstrued: the Woman of Worth has been used to justify both women's oppression and their independence. She is simultaneously a symbol of women's domestic subordination and their wisdom and power. Traditionalists and feminists alike have proof-texted this passage *ad nauseam*; this essay highlights some of those contributions in an impressionistic manner. It is my opinion, however, that both groups miss the real point of the passage by lifting it out of the context of the entire Book of Proverbs. Ultimately, then, I hope to suggest an alternate hermeneutic of Proverbs 31 which is informed by the text's position as the culmination of a book of wisdom. By borrowing aspects of both traditionalist and feminist interpretations, and adding my own conclusions about Proverbs 31 as a valuable strand in the wisdom tradition, I offer here a tentative synthesis of the passage geared toward practical application.

Before beginning to outline these three interpretations (traditionalist, feminist, and my own), let me say that one of the most neglected facets of Proverbs 31:10-31 is that it is an acrostic text. Each of its twenty-two lines

begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew *aleph-bet*, a device also found in Psalm 119 and Lamentations 1-4. The goal of this type of poem was likely didactic and geared towards memorization; this is particularly true of this passage which is introduced as a mother's instruction to her son. The acrostic apparatus underscored the idea that the passage contained advice to be heeded and passed on. I offer here a modern version of the acrostic text, loosely translated from the Hebrew.¹

10 A woman of worth who can find? She is far more precious than rubies.

11 Because of this, the heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.

12 Clearly she does him good, and not evil, all the days of his life.

13 Doing her work with willing hands, she seeks wool and flax.

14 Even as the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.

15 Faster than the sun is she, rising while it is still night to provide food for her family and tasks for her servant girls.

16 Giving careful consideration to a field, she buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

17 Herself she girds with strength; she makes her arms strong.

18 In her merchandise, she sees the profit of her own work. Her lamp does not go out at night.

19 Joyfully she puts her hands to the loom, and her hands hold the spindle.

20 Keenly she feels the plight of the needy and holds her hands outstretched to the poor.

21 Looming ahead is the threat of winter snow, but she is not afraid, for all in her household are clothed in crimson.

22 Making coverings for herself as well, she wears fine linen and purple.

23 Notable is her husband in the community; within the city gates he takes his seat with the elders of the land.

24 Once created, her linen garments are sold for money; she supplies the merchant with sashes.

25 Power, strength, and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs confidently at the time to come.

26 Quickened with wisdom is her mouth, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

1. A much more competent scholar has written that "English translations are totally unable to reproduce this poetic device." See Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 219. Readers who desire a more workable English rendering of the biblical acrostic are advised to turn to the J. B. Phillips translation or the JPS (Jewish Publication Society) version entitled *Kethubim*.

27 Regulating well the ways of her household, she does not eat the bread of idleness.

28 She is commended by her children, who rise up and call her blessed; her husband also praises her:

29 "There are other women who have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

30 Unnecessary is charm, and vain is beauty, but a woman who fears Yahweh is to be praised.

31 Value her, and give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.

PRUDENCE AND DISCRETION: A TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION

By far the most common interpretations of this passage can be termed "traditional"; such commentaries are likely to emphasize the "virtuous" woman in relation to her husband. Her work is viewed as an extension of her husband's household, silently contributing to its smooth operation. Moreover, her personal qualities are heralded as the ideal of modest women everywhere, which makes the traditionalist interpretation *prescriptive* rather than merely *descriptive*.²

Proverbs 31 has been quoted in sermons since the beginning of Christianity, but it assumed a new significance during the Puritan era. A uniquely Puritan twist on the passage was to call the woman of worth "Bathsheba."³ Puritans assumed that Solomon, the traditional author of the Proverbs material, had learned about domesticity from his mother, Bathsheba, and that Bathsheba is the woman of Proverbs 31, whose "children will rise up and call her blessed." (The irony of this, of course, is that Bathsheba is known to have committed adultery, having been previously married to the ill-fated Uriah before becoming one of King David's eleven wives. Moreover, modern scholars have taken issue with this entire scheme, arguing instead that the passage represents a selective adoption of an Egyptian genre of mother-son instructional material, and that the specific king in question here was a non-Israelite, Lemuel, as the passage itself claims.⁴)

Three seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sermons illustrate some other themes in a traditionalist interpretation of Proverbs. "The Descrip-

2. These terms, "prescriptive" and "descriptive," are borrowed from Kathleen Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 10.

3. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 14.

4. R. N. Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, no. 168 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 153.

tion of a Virtuous Woman," by eighteenth-century New England minister Matthew Henry, emphasizes our heroine's retiring maidenliness. His description of the woman as "virtuous" (the King James translation) instead of "capable," "worthy," or "strong" gives an entirely different flavor to the passage.⁵ Moreover, some of his tangents would be considered rather offensive today. It is difficult to imagine the sensitive 1990s pastor telling the women in his or her parish that a wife should "shew her love to him [her husband], not by a foolish fondness, but by prudent endearments, accommodating herself to his temper, and not crossing him, giving him good words, and not ill ones, no, not when he is out of humour."

Rhetoric like this reveals that in 1785 a husband's temper ruled the household, and a wife was encouraged—from the pulpit—to coddle him and cater to his moods. Her duty was to be ever-cheerful and accommodating.

We can also detect a hint of defensiveness in Henry's insistence upon the "Virtuous Woman's" limited domain. He writes: "She applies herself to the business that is proper for her. It is not in a scholar's business, or statesman's business, that she employs herself, but in women's business; *She seeks wool and flax.*" The Proverbs passage itself never raises these issues. There is no mention of women attempting to be scholars or national leaders; that was simply not a prominent issue in the rigidly defined world of Israelite society.⁶ But in Henry's own era, women were beginning to envision a different world for themselves, albeit gently—a change exemplified by Abigail Adams's request that her powerful husband, John Adams, "remember the ladies" in drafting the nation's Bill of Rights. We can see, then, that a so-called "traditionalist" interpretation emphasizes those aspects of the passage which seem best to contest the perceived laxity of the age. Women in the late eighteenth century were getting far too uppity for a traditionalist's sustained comfort.

A second, much earlier, sermon was preached at an English wedding in 1607 in the presence of the king. In this tender hour, officiant Robert Wilkinson noted that simply finding a virtuous woman in the first place was not entirely "a matter of impossibility, but yet for all that a thing of some difficulty!" In contrast to the biblical ideal, contemporary women,

5. Farmer points out the bias revealed in this translation. The Hebrew word *hayil*, "used elsewhere in the OT, is usually understood as a reference to power, meaning either physical strength, strength of character, or will power. Yet the same word in this passage is alternately translated 'virtuous' (KJV), 'good' (RSV), or, more appropriately, 'capable' (NEB)" (124).

6. Certainly, there are important exceptions to this general exclusion of women from national and public life: Deborah emerges as a national heroine, and less historically verifiable characters such as Esther and Judith also claim their places as legendary heroic women of Israel.

Wilkinson admonished, were far too frivolous and self-absorbed: "A world of wonders it is to see a Woman created in God's image, so miscreate oftentimes and deformed [is she] with her *French*, her *Spanish*, and her foolish fashions, that he that made her, when he looks upon her, shall hardly know her, with her Plumes, her Fans, and a silken vizard; with a ruff like a *sail*; yea, a ruff like a *rain-bow*. . . ."7

Whereas verses 21 and 22 speak favorably of the crimson⁸ and purple clothing with which our ideal woman has clothed her household, the Puritan interpretation stressed modesty and sobriety of dress.⁹ And while the passage itself mentions several times the woman leaving her home (to bring food from far away, v. 14; to invest in real estate, v. 16; and to sell her wares at the marketplace, v. 24), the Puritan reading of the poem honed in on the woman's exclusive tie to the domestic sphere. Seventeenth-century preacher Joseph Hall wrote in his commentary on "Salmons Oeconomicks" that the typical woman "is babbling and perverse; [her] feet . . . cannot abide in her house; *but are ever gadding*."¹⁰ In contrast, the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 has her feet firmly planted at home and is "true to her husbands bedde."¹¹

How might a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century woman have responded to such statements on women's roles? Women's reactions to the expectations placed upon them by male pastors like Henry, Wilkinson, and Hall reveal a certain anxiety about not measuring up to the standards. Hints of such apprehensive musings can be found in the journal of Esther Edwards Burr, a Presbyterian woman writing in the 1750s. In her letters to her dear friend Sarah Prince, Esther meditated on the Proverbs 31 passage by posing some practical questions: "Now I query whether 'tis possible for her to arise so early (if she sat up so late as you suppose) and live under it, unless she were made of some other *matter* than we be . . . I appeal to your experience. You know you cant get up erly in the

7. Robert Wilkinson, *The Royal Merchant: A Sermon Preached at White-Hall, Before the King's Majesty, at the Nuptials of an Honourable Lord and his Lady, 1607* (London: H. Hills, 1708), 9; copy in Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

8. The word which is often rendered as "crimson" can also be translated as "twice" or "double," as in the NEB, indicating that the prudent woman has no fear of winter because her household is doubly clothed in layers. See Alden, 221.

9. There is certainly a precedent for women's abstinence from colorful dress in the writings of Tertullian, a second-century North African theologian. Truly, Tertullian argues, if God had intended for women to wear brightly-dyed woolen clothing, he would have created sheep already decked out with fleece in such "illegitimate colours" as sky blue and purple. See his *On the Apparel of Women*, Book 1, chap. 8.

10. Hall was the Anglican bishop of Norwich in the early eighteenth century, although he had pronounced Puritan sympathies. This quote is from his *Solomon's Divine Arts*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 156.

11. *Ibid.*, 155.

Morn if you set up very late, dont you say?"¹² In other words, Esther was wondering aloud how this Superwoman could do it all, without sleep no less. *Her* life, she told Sarah, was exhausting. As the daughter of Jonathan Edwards and the wife of Aaron Burr, Sr., the first two presidents of Princeton University (then the College of New Jersey), her social duties were too numerous to be performed without constant fatigue. When faced with the ideal woman of Proverbs, who found time for weaving, marketing, agriculture, *and* caring for the needy, it is little wonder that poor Esther felt outclassed.

In our brief exploration of traditional historical interpretations, then, we have seen that commentators have tended to emphasize those aspects of the passage that might bolster up an image of the contemporary ideal woman—even if finding those characteristics in the actual text necessitated some hermeneutical gymnastics. Unfortunately, such a reading is not relegated solely to the provinces of earlier centuries. Today, interested interpreters still look to this woman from Proverbs as a model for ideal femininity, although at times such an interpretation might have to overlook the realities of what the text itself actually says.

If we were to peruse the shelves of Christian bookstores today, we would encounter literally dozens of titles which seek to define the role of the contemporary Christian woman. *Fascinating Womanhood*, *In Praise of Women*, *The Fulfilled Woman*, *The Total Woman*, *The Feminine Principle*: these books and others like them are a symbol of our age. In the wake of the feminist revolution, many evangelical Christians wish to stand apart from mainstream society and proclaim themselves different, separate, a peculiar people. One hard-hitting way to achieve this uniqueness is to hype the Christian woman as somehow different from her secular counterparts. Today's Christian woman is supposed to have it all, according to these authors. But her heart is so tied to her home that she feels no desire to venture beyond its realm. The crowning glory of her life is an adoring husband who pads around behind her murmuring, "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

It is no surprise that many of these writers—both women and men—have latched on to aspects of Proverbs 31 to address the appropriate role of today's Christian woman. In one of these books, a 1980 publication called *In Praise of Women*, Robina and John Wakeford employ each verse of Proverbs 31 as a segue into chapters focusing on some aspect of the ideal wife's intended role. Chapters include "A Family Marches on its Stomach," "The Adventures of a Bargain Hunter," "A Model Mother," and "Clothes Make the Woman." Here's an excerpt from "Clothes Make

12. Esther Edwards Burr, *Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757*, ed. Carol F. Karlson and Laurie Crumpacker (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 72.

the Woman":

If, as popular folklore has it, primitive man and his mate lived in a darkened cave, there is a good chance that on a snowy, cavebound winter day she announced that as soon as the weather warmed a little she intended to move the fire to another corner of the cave and suggested that as soon as he could get to moving around the countryside again he find some petrified wood for a table. And while he was at it, why not keep his eyes open for a beaver or two. She was sick of wearing these old rabbit skins! Thus perhaps at the dawn of history a woman was concerned about dressing her house and herself. Home decorating and clothing have long been a concern for women. Proverbs 31:22 indicates superwife could have been a bridge between primitive and modern woman.¹³

We might concede a certain astonishment at reading this interpretation of Proverbs 31. The cave story is irrelevant and inane, but the more serious transgression is that this scenario does not sound much like Proverbs at all. In Proverbs, remember, who is it who "brings the food from far away"? (v. 14) Who is it who makes her own clothing of fine linen, and clothing for her household besides? (v. 22) Who is it who supplies merchants (v. 24) with the cloth she has spun from her own wool? (v. 13) It was not her husband, about whom we know little except that he was a respected citizen. No, it was our woman of worth, doing all those things for herself, not waiting around for some man to catch her a beaver or fetch her some wood.

Just as Matthew Henry's sermon rhetoric revealed a great deal about his own era, this book and others like it demonstrate some of the deepest fears among the Christian right today. Many scholars have noted that the rhetoric of today's evangelical movement is characterized by the fear that men are becoming superfluous.¹⁴ If women can be educated, have careers, and support themselves and their children, then some fear that traditional male roles have been undermined. Books like *In Praise of Women* serve to comfort the beleaguered and confirm the notion that men are still in charge—that women still need them, and in fact would be lost without them.

In summary, traditionalist hermeneutics, like all interpretations, reveal anxieties about the interpreter's age and reflect these anxieties back onto the text in question. A traditionalist interpretation might also view the passage as prescriptive rather than simply descriptive. For the traditionalist, the Woman of Worth represents an ideal to which all women can

13. Robina and John Wakeford, *In Praise of Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

14. See, for example, Randall Balmer's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

and should aspire. We have witnessed, however, that a traditionalist interpretation might choose to emphasize some aspects of the "ideal" woman's activities, while ignoring or even entirely re-envisioning others.

"SHE GIRDS HERSELF WITH STRENGTH": A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION

Feminist ways of reading this passage are still being explored and developed. A basic premise of feminist critiques of Proverbs 31 is that the woman is judged and valued only on the basis of the service she provides for a man. The authors of *The Women's Bible Commentary*, a landmark feminist exposition, observe: "Good wives—providers of obedient, unpaid, silent labor—are so highly prized that they are considered a gift from God. . . . As always in male-centered scripture, the positive and negative roles of women are viewed primarily from the perspective of what they provide the men involved."¹⁵ This feminist critique rightly contends that praise for the woman of worth, though glowing, came only when she capably fulfilled the role assigned to her by men. Women who deviated from their assigned roles were dangerous and to be shunned, as can be seen clearly from Proverbs 30:1-9, the instruction immediately preceding our passage. In the mother's instruction to her princely son, she warns him not to give his strength to any woman. Women were likely to consume a man's strength just as surely as Samson was sapped by Delilah. This makes it all the more poignant that verse 10 begins with the question: who can find a woman of worth? The implication is that women, who nine times out of ten cannot be trusted with much, will rarely be as faithful and industrious as our Woman of Worth. She is so rare that she is to be esteemed far above rubies.

The feminist approach to the passage shows that women are clearly struggling to find life-affirming texts in the Bible. And there is much that is affirming in this passage. The word "strength" occurs four times in conjunction with our heroine. Her power is evident in verse 17, which claims, "She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong." She is obviously quite independent, as when we hear that "she considers a field, and then buys it" (v. 16). She does not wait for approval from her husband, but makes prudent investments of her own. She does her own trading and markets her merchandise wisely. She is a shrewd businesswoman. But she is also a benefactress, opening her hands to the poor and the needy ungrudgingly.

A feminist interpretation, however, cautions us to realize that our woman of worth was obviously in a unique socioeconomic situation for

15. Carol Ann Newson and Sharon Ringe, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 146.

Israelite women. She was probably a prosperous farmer's wife. We discern from the text that her husband was "known in the city gates," meaning that he was a citizen, and that he was well-regarded by the elders of Israel (v. 23). We know that the household was large and included many servants. She owned property in her own name, and it seemed she had "food storage" enough that she was not afraid of winter's snows, a rare emergency in the ancient Near East. She apparently could afford to be generous with others. And yet, despite her purple garments, her life was characterized not by the ease of court but by honest hard work, thriftiness, and wise investments. Her life was comfortable, to be sure, but not with the luxury of aristocracy and inherited position; her household was carefully maintained through planning, frugality, and unending labor.¹⁶

Even so, her life is a far cry from the more typical, and more squalid, life of a woman in Israelite society. The unfortunate reality is that more women were like Hagar, a maidservant whose sexuality was at the disposal of her master Abraham, or the Levite's concubine in Judges 19, whose name we never know, who was handed over to thugs to be raped and killed. When her master discovered that she was dead, he chopped her into twelve pieces and sent them to the twelve tribes of Israel—not because of the damage done to her as a person, but for the damage done to her as a piece of property. She was no longer of any use to him.

Through such stories we can imagine the darker side of what women in Israelite society must have faced. These were the more common realities: women were not educated, they could rarely hold property, and they could be divorced at any time by their husbands for the most trifling reasons. This picture is a bit different than what we see with our Woman of Worth, but such historical information can inform us about the underside of her life, and perhaps those of the "servant girls" we hear about in verse 15. Some of their worlds were probably considerably less pretty.

A feminist perspective, then, might consider the descriptive aspects of the ideal woman and interpret the passage as such. Proverbs 31 represents the life, factual or fictitious, of one woman in a particular socioeconomic circumstance in history. The test is not necessarily to be interpreted as "binding" on the single mother or urban dwellers or non-quilters of this world. It is not prescriptive for all women everywhere.

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM: AN ALTERNATE SUGGESTION

What, ultimately, do we have to gain from a traditionalist interpretation? I believe that traditionalists have the correct general view in taking

16. R. N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, no. 99 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 111.

a prescriptive approach to Proverbs 31—with some qualification. I think it is right and good for women to take strength from this woman's strength, gleanings also from the feminist approach that capable heroines exist in the Bible and must be recognized. I also find completely appropriate the feminist critics' reminder that the text cannot always be prescriptive in the sense that most women, even today, do not find themselves in identically comfortable socioeconomic circumstances. The Woman of Worth in our text cannot be regarded as a *model* housewife for those who might never have a servant, own a vineyard or its equivalent, or have "front money" enough to make shrewd initial investments.

How, then, might we say that the text *can* be prescriptive? Here, I think, traditionalists and feminists alike fundamentally miss the point by removing this acrostic poem from the entire wisdom tradition of which it is an integral part.¹⁷ The text is prescriptive in much the same way that Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes are prescriptive: it exhorts us to be *practically* wise. It offers an ideal example of wisdom personified. The opening line, which states that the Woman of Worth is far more precious than rubies, can be fruitfully compared to Proverbs 8:11, which declares that Dame Wisdom herself is "better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her." It is very possible that the Proverbs 31:10-31 poem serves as a final concrete reminder of Dame Wisdom's sagacious discretion. In this scenario even the tangible flourishing of the Woman of Worth reflects Dame Wisdom's favor: "Riches and honor are with me, enduring wealth and prosperity. . . . I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, endowing with wealth those who love, and filling their treasuries" (8:18, 20-21).

The "ideal" woman's prosperous household indicates, for Israelite society, that she is walking in the path of wisdom. Dame Wisdom, in fact, is presented in Proverbs 9:1-6 as a householder who opens her feast table to the poor and needy. This might seem to establish a divine precedent for the exposition of Proverbs 31, which details quite intricately the prudence and generosity of an earthly female householder. This human example is said to "open her mouth with wisdom" (v. 26) and to "fear Yahweh" (v. 30). This last statement, the only religious or pious assertion about the Woman of Worth, hearkens back to the very beginning of the Proverbs collection. The Prologue proclaims unequivocally that "the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom" (1:7). Thus the wisdom exhortation comes full circle in the eclectic gathering of proverbial sayings; what begins as a general statement on wisdom and the fear of Yahweh becomes exemplified in the very real circumstances of a model woman.

17. For more on the wisdom tradition, see Friedmann W. Golka, *The Leopard's Spots: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1994); and Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon Press, 1994).

In conclusion, Proverbs 31 should not be read, as far too many interpreters have done, out of the context of the rest of the Book of Proverbs. The wise ones of ancient Israel were primarily concerned with practical questions. What will contribute to the happiness of the human creation? Amid the diversity of answers present in the wisdom tradition one finds a common theme: the monumental love of Yahweh is the beginning of a rich, fruitful life. We all are to be sober and frugal, yet happy; industrious and never idle. Wisdom, present since the creation of the world (8:27-31), inspires us to rejoice in the daily round of working life. The Woman of Worth, who is the human quintessence of divine Wisdom, embodies the qualities which the Proverbs encourage all of us to have: discernment, industriousness, a cheerful countenance, and a strong sense of justice. Perhaps where traditionalists have gone wrong is in interpreting Proverbs 31 as a model for women only. I think that it is universally true that a person who fears Yahweh is to be praised. If we all apply God's revealed wisdom to our domestic lives, I cannot think but that our children will rise up and call us blessed.