

The Proverbs 31 Wife:

Fact or Fiction?

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“I hate Proverbs 31!” a missionary colleague once said. Now, this was a woman who loved God and loved her family. She was dedicated to serving her husband and training her children, devoting herself to what many would call traditional family values. In a moment of frustration, however, she vented her resentment toward the woman she could never match up to, Superwoman, Mrs. Palestine of 900 B.C.²

Some Christian women wince when reading Proverbs 31 because they feel inadequate. Others cringe because they only know the idealized version of someone’s imagination. The text has been used to create a woman who is like the touched-up model on a magazine cover, made to fit an editor’s definition of godly femininity. Driven by peer pressure into following this model, Christian women develop spiritual anorexia, not realizing that the image shoved before them is just as fake as the computer-enhanced photograph in the magazine.

Christian young men dream of getting this Proverbs 31 wife, and young Christian women dream of getting a man who deserves one. But does she exist? Or is she just an illusion, a Cinderella fantasy that disappears when the clock strikes midnight, leaving the prince alone with his dreams? Some say that the Proverbs 31 wife is only an idealized character that embodies all

¹ The author spent 19 years as a missionary among the Dayaks of Kalimantan Barat (West Borneo, Indonesia) and draws upon her experiences there for insights into the description of the Proverbs 31 wife.

² The actual date of the writing of Proverbs is unknown.

the godly virtues, the heroine of a spiritual romance that ceases to exist when the covers of the book are closed. She is fictional. She is too perfect.³

She cannot, however, be dismissed as fictional. God's Word doesn't set up standards that are impossible to attain. The God who inspired Proverbs 31 also spoke through Jesus, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48) and through Moses and Peter, "Be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:44, 1 Pet. 1:16).⁴ Man's solution to a seemingly impossible goal is to lower the goal. God's solution, however, is to provide power to reach the goal. Becoming a Proverbs 31 woman is a realistic goal and worthy aspiration.

The problem is not in deciding whether she is real. Rather, the dilemma is determining the true message of the poem, particularly given the culture gap between the present and this B.C. description. Some women see the poem as justification for declaring an emancipation proclamation, while some men use it to confine their wives to the home. Both claim that they are promoting godly womanhood, but the women they describe are so dissimilar that the definition of godliness itself is in question. It is no wonder that Christian wives experience an identity crisis when they read Proverbs 31. Their desire to be a godly woman gets frustrated somewhere between the loom on which this woman weaves her family's clothes and her lamp that never goes out.

³ Many have argued that the woman of Proverbs 31 is another personification of Lady Wisdom, who is presented in contrast to Dame Folly in the rest of the book, especially chapters 1-9. Tom R. Hawkins argues successfully that this view is not likely valid. "Numerous verbal repetitions describe both Lady Wisdom in chapters 1-9 and the noble wife of the final poem, thus suggesting, as some argue, that 31:10-31 depicts a personification of wisdom. One such parallel relates to the value of "finding" both wisdom and the noble woman. . . ." (p. 16). He continues by listing other parallels between the two. He concludes, however, that significant differences exist. "While Lady Wisdom is never clearly pictured as a wife or mother in Proverbs 1-9, the noble woman is obviously both. Her role as a mother, though not strongly emphasized, is reflected in 31:28." He argues that the noble wife *speaks* with wisdom, so it makes no sense to have her *be* wisdom as well. Rather than personifying wisdom, the noble wife is "the epitome of all that Lady Wisdom teaches" (p. 18). (Tom R. Hawkins, "The Wife of Noble Character in Proverbs 31:10-31," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:609 [January 96]. Galaxie Software.)

⁴ Whether perfection is actually attainable in this life is not the question here. Rather, both wise living and holiness are to be goals for which the Christian aims. Lower the standards is a way of excusing sin. Although both folly and trespass exist and can be forgiven through repentance, neither can be justified.

Focusing on the specific jobs with which this woman occupies herself, however, diverts attention from the wisdom emphasis of the poem. The Proverbs 31 woman is above all a mature woman of wisdom who practices the virtues taught in the rest of Proverbs. Her work is a demonstration of the wisdom she has acquired, put to practice in her own cultural setting. This same wisdom is available to Christian women today, i.e., the wisdom that comes through knowing God and becoming conformed to his character.

She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.

31:10

In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.

31:19

Who is the virtuous woman?

Her textual identity

Her textual identity in the book of Proverbs

The text of Proverbs does not name the noble woman it describes in such detail. The author is King Lemuel, who was known by Israel's sages even though he remains unknown to us. He received the instruction from his own mother. In addition to admonishing her son that a king must not give in to any unrestrained living that would jeopardize his ability to rule,⁵ she summarizes the kind of wife that would add honor to his name. He must look for a truly valiant⁶ wife who fears the Lord and not be tempted by mere beauty and charm. Lemuel applies the advice to more than the royal household, for the husband described within is an elder of the city, not a king. Thus, what was originally designed as advice for a prince has been included in Scripture for the benefit of all classes.

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.

Prov. 31:10

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

Prov. 31:30

⁵ Prov. 31:1-9.

⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, "The Role of the 'Valiant Wife' in the Marketplace," CRUX 35:3 (Sept. 1999): 23.

Some deny that this too-good-to-be-true wife could be just one woman. She must be an ideal, composite picture of what one could desire in a wife if it were possible to acquire it all in one package.

Though no woman can match skills and creativity perfectly with this model, all can identify their respective talents within the composite, and all can strive for the spiritual excellence of this woman of strength. This passage is recited in many Jewish homes on the eve of Sabbath, not only setting the high challenge for wife and mother but also expressing gratitude for her awesome service to the household.⁷

Nevertheless, we cannot escape the textual presentation of her as one, distinct person whose wisdom benefits not only her household but the community as well. Seeing her as a composite creates unwarranted opportunity for excusing ourselves from any obligation to be like her.

Duane Garrett, in the *New American Commentary*, says that the focus of the poem is not on the woman at all but on the young man's need to find such a wife.

The book everywhere addresses the young man ("my son") and not the young woman. It expounds in great detail on evils of the prostitute and how she is a snare for a young man; it says nothing about lusty boys and the threats they pose for young women.⁸

His conclusion is based at least in part upon the structure of the poem, which he claims climaxes in verse 23, which is not about the wife but the husband: "Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land." Verse 23, rather than being an "intrusion" into a text that is primarily about the wife, "actually established the central message of the poem: this woman is the kind of wife a man needs in order to be successful."⁹ Indeed, the

⁷ Dorothy Patterson, "The High Calling of Wife and Mother in Biblical Perspective," in *Return to Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by Wayne Grudem and John Piper (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 367.

⁸ Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, The New American Commentary*, Vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 248.

⁹ *Ibid.*

husband has no prospect of having a “fulfilling life” or becoming wise “without the good wife because she creates the environment in which he can flourish.”¹⁰

Bruce Waltke, however, believes that “the poem represents the ideal wife as a heroic entrepreneur in the marketplace.”¹¹ Citing the work of Al Wolters,¹² Waltke outlines the poem’s use of Hebrew terms normally associated with praise awarded to

military heroes. The noble wife is thus raised to heroic status because of the good she does for her people.¹³ The focus of the poem is not the husband but the wife, “a talented, creative and adventurous entrepreneur [who] serves her husband.”¹⁴ Waltke

The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.
Prov. 14:1
 The husband has full confidence in [the noble wife] and lacks nothing of value.
Prov. 31:11

says that “Garrett’s comment. . . should be emended to ‘this is the kind of a wife the community needs.’ She empowers her wise husband to lead the land in righteousness and justice.”¹⁵ In contrast to the foolish woman who tears down her household and brings dismay to her husband, this wise woman acts in such a way that her husband can fully trust her.

Before determining how this instruction should be applied to today’s woman, several assumptions need to be recognized.

Assumption 1: She is a mature woman.

The woman described in the text is a mature woman, not a new bride. She shows the confidence of one who has gained experience over time, both in her spiritual development and in

¹⁰ Ibid., 252.

¹¹ Waltke, 23.

¹² Al Wolters, “Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymnic: A Form-Critical Analysis.” *Vetus Testamentum* XXXVIII (1988): 446-457. Cited in Waltke, “The Role of the ‘Valiant Wife’ in the Marketplace.” *CRUX* 35:3 (Sept. 1999): 23-34.

¹³ Waltke, 25.

¹⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

her skills as a homemaker. Young men hoping to discover a readymade Proverbs 31 wife are setting themselves up for a disappointment if they expect to say “I do” to a bride with this much skill or wisdom.¹⁶

The prologue to Proverbs (chapters 1-9) repeatedly emphasizes the need to *learn* wisdom by listening to instruction, heeding correction and obeying God’s commands.¹⁷ In the same way that homemaking skills become perfected with practice, so also understanding and wisdom increase over time when one

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

Prov. 1:8

He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.

Prov. 15:32

walks with the Author of wisdom. A new bride may not match the Proverbs 31 woman’s skill, but she will be counted wise if she makes a conscious choice to follow the Way of Wisdom.

Assumption 2: Her husband is a wise and mature man.

Second, this woman is married to a man who is qualified to sit in the gates as an elder of his people. He has presumably been successful in his own endeavors and thereby has gained the respect of the community. He recognizes that he has a superb wife and appropriately leaves the management of the home to her.¹⁸

Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.

Prov. 31:23

Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.

Prov. 31:11

¹⁶ See also Hawkins, p. 21.

¹⁷ Proverbs presents the father’s instruction as having come from *his* father (Prov. 4:3ff), who taught him because he had also learned the wisdom that comes from the fear of the Lord.

¹⁸ See also 1 Tim. 5:14. Paul sees the management of the home as the proper role for a wife. The Greek word used, *οἰκοδεσποτέω*, is a powerful verb of ruling. Although a *hapax legomena* in the New Testament, it is used in other Greek literature to describe the responsibilities of those who have complete charge of the daily activities of the household. NASB’s translation of “keeping house” is far too weak, since “keeping house” to many women refers only to such chores as doing the dishes and sweeping the floor.

A wife's practice of godly wisdom, however, is not dependent upon her husband's being godly or successful.

. . . I [Wisdom] raise my voice to all mankind.
Prov. 8:4

Godliness and wisdom can and should be practiced in any environment. Women who are not in an ideal marital situation should not become discouraged or try to excuse themselves from reaching for wisdom. God has promised wisdom to every woman who has set her heart on obtaining it.¹⁹

Assumption 3: Her household is economically well off.

Third, the Proverbs 31 wife is part of a well-to-do household. Waltke mentions that the poem "assumes the husband has founded the home on a sound economic foundation (24:27) and within that context his wife can settle down and

She sees that her trading is profitable. . .
Prov. 31:18

When it snows, she has no fear for her house-hold; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.
Prov. 31:21

function to her maximum ideal.²⁰ The text indicates that the woman's prudent management of the family's resources brought economic security to all of her household.

Many women conclude that it would be impossible to live up to this woman's example without also having her servants. In their dreams, the servants would do the household work and leave them free to carry on her other pursuits.

However, this betrays both a misunderstanding of the role of servants and of the author's point. In the North American context, *servant* brings to mind either (1) the historical slave of

She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.
Prov. 31:15

¹⁹ Prov. 8:4-5, Jas. 1:5.

²⁰ Waltke, 30. Garret's remark that the husband is dependent upon his wife both for worldly success and for the acquiring of wisdom (252) is too strong. Both husband and wife can create environments that enhance the potential of the other, but neither success nor wisdom is guaranteed in either case. Wisdom is primarily a spiritual matter and can only be gained when one is willing to learn.

the Southern plantation, or (2) a domestic worker whom only the rich can afford to pay. Neither description comes close to depicting the Proverbs 31 household servant.

Even today where modern “electric servants” to which the West has become accustomed do not exist, household chores can be both physically demanding and time consuming. Without readymade clothes, canned foods, and prepared spices, clothing and feeding a household require a huge amount of one’s day. With no electricity or indoor plumbing, every chore done by the machines the West takes so much for granted becomes a major job. The housewife needs help.

In Indonesia, it is common for a family to take in younger relatives to become servants.²¹ The family assumes responsibility for their food and clothing, school fees and medicine, but is not obligated to give any wages. Even a very poor Dayak²² woman, when she has an infant, would consider it unthinkable to be deprived of such a servant to cook the rice, fetch the water from the river and help tend the baby. The rich are not the only ones who have servants.

Servants help, but they also bring responsibility.²³ The Proverbs 31 woman shouldered this responsibility as normal routine in her household and did it well. The wise woman can live with or without servants. In either case, she organizes and carries out her work with wisdom, overseeing and advising everyone in her household.

She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

31:26-27

Assumption 4: The Proverbs 31 woman is a healthy woman.

The fourth assumption from the text is that the Proverbs 31 woman is healthy, strong and fit for her job. Can a woman

She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.

31:17

She is clothed with strength. . .

31:25

²¹ Indonesian *pembantu*, lit., *a helper*.

²² The Dayaks are the indigenous tribes of Kalimantan, i.e., Borneo.

²³ Many missionary women would far prefer to have electric servants and do the household chores themselves than to have to supervise a number of household servants and be responsible for their training and behavior.

excuse herself from being a Proverbs 31 wife, then, if she has not been blessed with a healthy body and a vigorous immune system? If the amount of household tasks accomplished is the rule by which we measure a woman's worthiness, then we have established a superficial standard for wisdom. Certainly a healthy body is valuable, but wisdom is not dependant upon physical strength. Being a Proverbs 31 woman does not demand the perfect body. Instead, it needs a healthy spirit that is attuned to the Spirit of God.

In summary, then, although the author of Proverbs 31 delights in all this jewel of a woman does in the ruling of her household, her above-rubies value is not dependent upon her homemaking skills, her worthy husband, her comparative wealth, or her physical health. Her value is in using the wisdom God has given her, a wisdom that springs from her fear of the Lord.

This is no assumption. The writer summarizes this remarkable wife with these words: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all. Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised."²⁴ Herein is the key to understanding the entire poem: the noble wife is a woman who fears the Lord. Focusing only on this industrious woman's work will cloud this crucial point.

Many women, even non-Christians, out of innate common sense and providential goodness devote themselves to caring successfully for their husbands and children, making the needs of their household the primary focus of their lives. What,

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge. . .
Prov. 1:7
 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
Ps. 111:10

then, differentiates the wise wife of Proverbs 31 from her counterparts? It is her fear of the Lord, not her wise shopping or her control over her children.²⁵

²⁴ Prov. 31:29-30.

²⁵ Wise readers will interpret Proverbs 31 in the context of what Proverbs has already said about wisdom. They will then compare this wife's character with the rest of the Bible's instruction on wisdom. Many articles written about Proverbs 31 focus more on the woman's submission to her husband rather than her submission to God. Submission

How does the Proverbs 31 woman’s fear of the Lord make her different from other accomplished homemakers?

1. Her focus is on God.

First of all, her primary focus is on God—not on her husband and not on her children. She fulfills the duties of her

<p>Fear the LORD your God, serve him only. . . . <i>Deut. 6:13</i></p>
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calling in life as a wife and mother while looking to the Lord for his strength and his direction.

Some well-meaning writers and teachers have missed this important distinction. Marcia Ramsland, for example, writing for the Christian women’s magazine *P31 Woman*, encourages her readers to remember that the woman’s “inspiration is to emulate the end goal in Proverbs 31:28 ‘her children arise and call her blessed.’”²⁶

Hoping for children—or a husband—to “arise and call her blessed” destines even godly women to discouragement and failure. Why? Because it falsely assumes that children who are raised in godly homes will choose to follow the path of wisdom and thereby recognize the value of their mother’s commitment to God’s righteousness. Its falseness is manifested in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, which show a wise father repeatedly begging his son to give everything he has in order to obtain wisdom. Why does he have to beg? Because the son has a choice. He can elect to heed his father’s wisdom, or he can choose to close his ears and go the way of folly.

<p>Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. <i>Prov. 1:8</i></p> <p>My son, if you accept my words . . . turning your ear to wisdom . . . , and if you call out for insight . . . , and if you look for it as for silver . . . , then you will understand the fear of the LORD. . . . <i>Prov. 2:1-5</i></p>

does not make one wise. Rather, the wise woman lives in obedience to God and therefore submits to her husband for the Lord’s sake.

²⁶ Marcia Ramsland, “Organizing Children: Never Say, ‘Go Clean Your Room,’” in *P31 Woman* (January 2004), 9. Italics in the original.

Even the wisest of mothers have children who refuse to listen. If they choose to follow the path of folly, they reap the consequences of that choice. The devastated mother watches these children, to whom she has devoted her life, deliberately and stupidly choosing to walk in sin's way, heedless of the destruction about which they have been warned. If her goal has been for her children to appreciate her instruction and call her blessed, she can only conclude that she is a failure. Even if she holds out hope for eventual repentance, she has no guarantee that her child will utter such words before dying.

A wife can never make the praise of human beings her end goal. As blessed as a woman might be to have appreciative children and a grateful husband, the greater blessing will come from God himself, who in the Day of Judgment will say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."²⁷ Those who work with hope of praise from others in this life have no promise of reward in the next.²⁸ The wise woman runs the race of life, as all faithful Christians do, with her eyes on Jesus Christ, the "author and perfecter of our faith,"²⁹ and waits for *his* words of commendation.

2. *She hates evil.*

A wife who fears the Lord also hates evil, for "The fear of the Lord— that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding" (Job 28:28). The wise woman not only abounds in good works but deliberately avoids anything that can be construed as sin.

<p>To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.</p>

Prov. 8:13

In a fully God-centered household, shunning evil may be comparatively easy. But what about the wife who must exercise godliness and wisdom when everyone else in her household

²⁷ Matt. 25:21.

²⁸ Matt. 6:1-5.

²⁹ Heb. 12:2.

has no such interest? Wickedness can be an everyday reality, provoking inescapable confrontation between good and evil, between a devout wife and an ungodly husband. How does a wife in such an environment become a Proverbs 31 woman?

Often such women are referred to 1 Peter 3 and advised to submit to their husbands, living out the Christian life in humility and gentleness. These are good principles, but they are not the only ones to be considered.³⁰ The wife cannot be submissive to evil and at the same time be a Proverbs 31 woman because the woman who fears the Lord does not participate in evil. Any application of Proverbs 31 must take into consideration women whose husbands are *not* qualified to be respected leaders of society, sitting in the gate or in the courthouse.³¹

3. *She is compassionate and fair to all.*

A wife who fears the Lord treats all with compassion and fairness. God warns, “I will be quick to testify against . . . those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me” (Mal. 3:5). Because she fears the Lord, the Proverbs 31 woman dispenses what is fair to those who work for her, and she gives generously of what she has to the needy.

She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.

Prov. 31:15

She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.

Prov. 31:20

He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.

Prov. 14:31

A kindhearted woman gains respect. . .

Prov. 11:16

³⁰ Peter writes in a context of the Christian’s commitment to holiness.

³¹ James R. Slaughter writes, “Peter’s readers must also consider that submission in keeping with God’s character rules out a wife’s agreement to a husband’s ungodly requests.” He continues: It is a grave matter for a wife to contemplate not submitting to her husband. However, in numerous examples in Scripture God affirmed His people who refused to obey men when to do so meant to disobey God.³¹ Ultimately there is a higher authority than people, namely, the Lord Himself. It follows that the husband’s authority over his wife is limited. . . . To commit sin in obedience to her husband would be to disobey Christ, her higher authority. In doing so she would be violating Peter’s earlier command to be holy as God Himself is holy (1:15). (James R. Slaughter, “Submission of Wives (1 Pet 3:1a) in the Context of 1 Peter,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:609 [January 1996]: 64-75, Galaxie Software.

4. *She delights in the Lord's commands.*

Scripture affirms that those who fear the Lord not only obey his commands but take pleasure in doing so. The psalmist wrote, “Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands” (Ps. 112:1). Psalm 119 extols God’s commands with numerous metaphors that portray how delightful God’s words are: they are wondrous (18), good (39), like songs (54), more valuable than gold (72), sweeter than honey (103), and a light (105). Repeatedly the psalmist expresses his joy in obeying and meditating upon God’s commands (16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77 *et al*).

This joy—joy *in* the Lord and joy *from* the Lord—belongs to the wife who fears the Lord. Whether a wife literally sews her own clothes or whether she buys them in a department store makes little difference in qualifying her as a Proverbs 31

When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet. She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.

Prov. 31:21-22

woman. If providing clothes for her children or choosing them for her husband is part of her agreed-upon duties, then doing these things with a joyful spirit out of service to the Lord puts her into the category of a Proverbs 31 woman.

The harder the real-life environment, the more critical this “delight in the Lord and in his commands” becomes in enabling a woman to survive without succumbing to depression or sinful anger. When family members are unappreciative or when financial pressures escalate, the Spirit of wisdom remains strong, comforting, guiding and giving inner joy, and at the same time reassuring that being a Proverbs 31 woman is not dependent upon pleasing others but upon trusting and obeying God.

5. *She is teachable.*

The woman who fears the Lord continues to grow in wisdom. The young groom will not find the finished product standing beside him at the altar. However, if his bride has determined in her heart to spend her life learning God's wisdom, he will have a treasure. He will likewise be a precious possession to his wife if he has chosen to do the same, because the truly wise will not be wise in their own eyes but instead will recognize their need for additional wisdom from God.³²

Let the wise listen and add to their learning. . .

Prov. 1:5

Proverbs 31 ends with an admonition that the godly wife deserves to be praised. Before praise, however, comes a humble spirit that is teachable, for “The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor” (Prov. 15:33).

6. *She is a peacemaker.*

Whoever fears the Lord strives for peace. No household exists in which squabbles do not develop. The wife not only has to live at peace with her husband but she also has to keep children from quarreling and angrily hurting one another. Psalm

[Wisdom's] ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.

Prov. 3:17

There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil, but joy for those who promote peace.

Prov. 12:20

34 teaches that the fear of the Lord involves the pursuit of peace—but not at the expense of truth. The Proverbs 31 woman does not achieve peace at all costs. She is both peaceful and truthful. The woman who fears the Lord is to “keep [her] tongue from evil and [her] lips from speaking lies” and is to “turn from evil and do good, [to] seek peace and pursue it” (Ps. 34:11-14).

A wife who truly fears the Lord, then, is the epitome of the Proverbs 31 woman. She is the woman who will continue to grow in wisdom, carrying out all of her duties in the manner that God desires.

³² Prov. 3:7, 9:9; Isa. 5:21.

Her textual identity in the book of Ruth

The identity of the Proverbs 31 woman is enhanced by its placement immediately before the book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible. The sages who were responsible for the final organization of the *Tanakh* saw a relationship between the noble wife of Proverbs 31 and Ruth, the widowed Moabitess.

In the Hebrew Bible . . . [Ruth] is considered an addendum to the book of Proverbs. The character of Ruth is thus portrayed as a historical example of the “virtuous woman” of Pr 31:10-31. . . . Boaz calls Ruth “a woman of noble character.” In that same passage, Boaz says of Ruth, “All my fellow townsmen [lit., those at the city gate] know that you are a woman of noble character” (3:11). Boaz thus says of Ruth, the ancestress of David, precisely what the poem in Pr 31 says of the virtuous woman.³³

The desired treasure of Proverbs 31:10³⁴ is variously translated as “a virtuous woman” (KJV), “an excellent wife” (NASB), “a wife of noble character” (NIV), “a virtuous wife” (NKJV), and “a virtuous and capable wife” (NLT). With the exception of the KJV, Hebrew *isha* [אִשָּׁה] has been translated as wife, a legitimate translation in the context. However, *isha* can also be translated *woman*, as in the KJV. The Hebrew used in Prov. 31:10 is exactly that used to describe Ruth. In the midnight confrontation with Ruth, Boaz declares her to be a noble woman.³⁵

On the surface, little similarity exists between the noble woman of Proverbs 31 and the Moabitess Ruth. The Proverbs 31 woman had a husband and children who called her “blessed,” whereas Ruth was a childless widow whose child-rearing skills had not yet been tested. The first woman is comparatively wealthy and has resources to invest in further financial ventures, but

³³ John H. Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 213.

³⁴ Also in Prov. 12:4: A wife of noble character (אִשָּׁה-תָּמִיל) is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.

³⁵ אִשָּׁה-תָּמִיל.

Ruth is a poverty-stricken gleaner, forced to gather the grain that others have missed. The Proverbs 31 woman had apparently been raised among the people of YHWH; in contrast, Ruth had spent most of her life as the spiritual daughter of a pagan god. Yet both women were declared noble.

What is it that they had in common? They both feared the Lord. Ruth deliberately chose to follow YHWH, the covenant God of the Israelites. New to the Israelite community and to its religion, she nevertheless quickly earned the reputation of being a woman of noble character.

Table 1 A Comparison of the Virtuous Woman (Proverbs 31) and Ruth

<i>Fear of the Lord (the beginning of wisdom)</i>		Your God [will be] my God. (1:16) [Boaz said,] May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge. (2:12)
<i>Diligence and productivity</i>	She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls. (31:15) She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. (31:17) She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. (31:27)	She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now. (2:7)
<i>Care for others, concern for the poor</i>	She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. (31:20)	Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. (1:16-17) I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. (2:11)
<i>Praiseworthy</i>	Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. (31:30) Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate. (31:31)	All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. (3:11)

Never a discouraging word

Seeing the relationship between the virtuous wife and the widow Ruth should remove many of the stumbling blocks that women encounter when reading Proverbs 31. It is possible to

be a noble woman, whether married or single. Unfortunately, many popular treatments of the subject intensify discouragement rather than alleviating it, either by skewing the interpretation of the text or by trivializing the nobility ascribed to the Proverbs 31 woman.

1. Skewed interpretations

Interpreting Proverbs 31 through a preconceived notion of what godly womanhood demands has certainly caused many women to be discouraged. The text is misused to “prove” the prevailing idea.³⁶

Other problems arise because this woman’s daily work is envisioned in the context of our own cultural experience. Such is

... her lamp does not go out at night.

Prov. 31:18

the case with the lamp that does not go out at night. How could anyone arise before dawn to begin her tasks and still burn the midnight oil, working into the wee hours just so that the members of her household can have their scarlet clothes? When does she sleep? Mothers of

newborns know what it is to go without sleep, but they survive because they know that eventually the child will begin sleeping through the night. But to think that getting by on a minimum

When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

Prov. 31.21

amount of sleep day after day, year after year is a *recommended* regimen causes one secretly to wonder if God doesn’t get some kind of pleasure out of sentencing a wife to an early breakdown. How can the woman who works herself to death be called wise?

God, however, is the Shepherd who carries the lambs in his arms and gently leads those who are with young, extending both strength and compassion.³⁷ He provides sleep for the ones

³⁶ This explains why Proverbs 31 has been used both to keep a wife at home and also to allow her to work in some other job. Factors other than Scripture determine what a woman, or more specifically a wife, should be and do, and the Scriptures are then used to “prove” it.

³⁷ Isa. 40:11; cf. 40:28-31.

he loves.³⁸ A woman cannot maintain the physical strength depicted in this chapter and at the same time go without necessary sleep. What is the significance of the burning lamp, then?

Note that the line about the lamp is paired with a statement about financial accomplishments:

*She sees that her trading is profitable,
and her lamp does not go out at night. (31:18)*

What does her “profitable trading” have to do with her lamp?

Let’s travel briefly to the jungles of Borneo where this writer lived for 19 years. Around 10 p.m. each night, one of us would trudge to the back of the property to shut off the generator and then head back to the house. We could see in the windows the dim lights of kerosene lamps. Inside, two lamps remained lit through the night, dispelling just enough darkness so that anyone getting up in the night would not stumble. These were our nightlights.

Our neighbors depended totally upon kerosene lamps. Part of the daily routine, both theirs and ours, was to prepare the lamps for the night by filling them with kerosene, cleaning the chimneys and trimming the wicks. Occasionally a family would not have enough money to purchase the oil needed to keep the lamps burning all night, so they would extinguish the lights early to save on oil.

The lamp in Proverbs 31 did not go out because the woman managed her finances well, strategically planning for the necessities. She could sleep confidently, knowing that she had oil in her lamps. The rooms would be lighted just enough for household members to move around safely in the darkness.³⁹

³⁸ Ps. 127:1-2.

³⁹ The opposite view is taken by Duane A. Garrett who believes that the woman works long after dark. Rather than seeing the pairing within v. 18 itself, he sees a contrast being made between dawn (v. 15) and night (v. 18). “The point is that she gets up early and does not quit work until well after dark.” If the *dawn* of v. 15 and the *night* of v. 18 formed an inclusio with the woman’s industrious activity listed between, the argument would be stronger.

2. Trivialized nobility

Discouragement can also come from equating man's questionable judgments with God's eternal wisdom. In an honest effort to advise women on how to be godly, stress is put upon the details of her daily activities. Some advice has the unfortunate consequence of equating godly wisdom with such actions as choosing tools for the kitchen⁴⁰ or supporting a husband's masculinity.⁴¹ Even though discussion on these matters may be helpful, they do not in themselves comprise wisdom. They are like the Proverbs 31 pin that resembles an antique cameo brooch and sells for \$24.99. Its "genuine Austrian crystals" are made to look like rubies, but they are not the real thing.⁴²

Even some of the practical, common-sense guidance appearing in Christian women's magazines cannot be equated with godly wisdom, for it is aimed at middle-class America. True godly wisdom is supracultural. It must apply to the Dayak woman in the jungles of Borneo who lives in a thatched-roof hut as much as it does to the Western woman whose husband earns enough to provide a 3-bedroom townhouse in suburbia. The illiterate immigrant who has never attended school must have access to this wisdom as much as the university graduate who is amply able to homeschool her children. Godly wisdom produces godly character that is needed in any society and at any economic level. The details of a woman's daily work will vary greatly depending upon her cultural surroundings, her physical abilities, and her economic status, but if

However, her daily activities continue beyond v. 18. It is better to see the two halves of v. 18 related to each other, thus relating the burning of the lamp (18b) to her prosperous trading (18a). (Garrett, p. 250, n. 12.)

⁴⁰ "Utensils and Cookery," *A Virtuous Woman*, <http://www.avirtuouswoman.org/kitchen/tools.html>, 7 Nov. 2004.

⁴¹ Devyna Hannah, "My Idea of a Virtuous Woman," <http://avirtuouswoman.org/christian/virtuouswoman.html>, 7 Nov. 2004.

⁴² The Proverbs 31 Woman pin is available from www.scripturewear.net. The ad includes the information that this and similar jewelry are made by stay-at-home moms in North Carolina.

she is a Proverbs 31 woman she will carry out her appropriate tasks with wisdom in the fear of the Lord, whatever those tasks may be.

Discouragement mounts when Christian moms are unwisely pressured by their husbands or their churches into adopting philosophies called “God’s Way.” The highly controversial *Growing Kids God’s Way*⁴³ has been used by “more than 9,000 churches and schools worldwide,”⁴⁴ but it has also spawned division because of the rigidity of its expectations that go beyond scriptural teaching. *Above Rubies*, a magazine devoted to producing the Proverbs 31 woman, promotes “Breastfeeding God’s Way” in an article that contains some common sense, but also includes questionable exegesis.⁴⁵ Ironically, both of these claim to be “God’s Way,” but they contradict each other on the same issues.⁴⁶

Unfortunately, what is termed *God’s Way* does not necessarily display the godly wisdom of the Scriptures. *Preparing for Marriage God’s Way* has some valuable exercises for a prospective bride and groom, but its advice in “Husbanding God’s Way,” “Being a Wife God’s Way,” and “Family Finances God’s Way” is made up of, at best, highly cultural applications of perceived biblical principles.⁴⁷ An acrostic with Bible verses beginning with each letter of the alphabet may be a great tool for teaching both the alphabet and biblical truths to children, but it

⁴³ Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, *Growing Kids God’s Way*. (The newer edition has been retitled, *Along the Virtuous Way*.)

⁴⁴ Growing Families International, <<http://www.gfi.org/java/prodDesc.jsp?product=110>> 16 Mar. 2004.

⁴⁵ <http://aboverubies.org/articles/Breastfeed.html> 17 Mar. 2004. The magazine *Above Rubies* originated in New Zealand in 1977 and now prints 130,000 copies of each edition, although it is not printed on a regular basis. Circulation is worldwide. Above Rubies also maintains a large website with articles intended for women who want to be like the Proverbs 31 wife.

⁴⁶ The Ezzos’ program *Growing Kids God’s Way* and *Baby Wise*, the secular version, advocates adherence to a feeding schedule determined by the parents, even for an infant, rather than the more frequently recommended “attachment parenting” approach, which includes on-demand feeding, that is supported by most physicians and lactation specialists.

⁴⁷ Wayne A. Mack, *Preparing for Marriage God’s Way* (Virgil Hensley Pub.: 1986).

should not be called “Learn[ing] the Alphabet God’s Way.”⁴⁸ “Dealing with Behavioral Problems God’s Way” should not detail a rebellious teenage son’s actions on the Web for the entire world to read—and that not even anonymously.⁴⁹ Attaching God’s name to conclusions reached by fallible human reasoning only shows arrogance and results in discouraged women who find they can’t measure up to legalism’s demands.

God’s way for all people is the way of wisdom, and that wisdom is in the Scriptures. The noble woman, married or single, rich or poor, healthy or infirm, is one who knows the Lord, fears him and obeys him, no matter what her outward circumstances are. In choosing God’s way, she adapts his principles of wise living to her individual circumstances in such a way that both her actions and her words reflect the wisdom and character of her Lord.

⁴⁸ “Memorizing our ABC’s,” <www.momof9splace.com> 17 Mar. 2004.

⁴⁹ This webpage was last updated in 2002. The address is not being included here lest the author be guilty of spreading the damage further.

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