

Understanding the Wife of Proverbs 31

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2014

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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Abstract

Sometimes understanding the Bible is difficult, especially when one has no understanding of the cultural background for the passage. Having an example of what the Lord sees as an excellent wife is invaluable. The Proverbs 31:10-31 passage describes character qualities of an admirable wife that the reader can practically apply to everyday life. An understanding of the Hebrew culture aids in the understanding of the excellent wife in the passage. This paper will include cultural background information and word studies. It will also integrate other Old Testament and New Testament scriptures that will further contribute to the readers understanding of the diligent wife in the passage. The twenty-one verses in Proverbs 31:10-31 illustrate many honorable qualities of the excellent wife and discuss many of her daily and regular activities. Indeed, such noble women are rare. The good news is that although they are rare; they still exist.

Introduction

The Bible, foundational to the Christian life, is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16). The Word of God is relevant, trustworthy, and inspiring. Proverbs 31 is no exception. This text guides men and women in godliness as it describes the godly wife; having an example of what the Lord sees as an excellent wife is invaluable. However, this passage of scripture was written to a culture very different from the twenty-first century's, and careful study is needed to ensure proper understanding of its principles. Therefore, by first examining the Hebrew culture in which the godly wife lived and then using this information as a backdrop, this paper will attempt to understand the essence of the excellent wife of Proverbs 31:10-31.

Understanding the Old Testament Hebrew Family

The cultural setting often determines how a family's members relate to each other and function as a unit. Since many of the proverbs relate to the home, understanding the average Israelite's family dynamics is important. One of the most important features of the Israelite household was its leader—the father.¹ It was the oldest father's job to be the ultimate authority figure in the household. The son assumed this authority when his father died.² The average household often consisted of three or four generations:³ the father (and possibly his younger brothers),⁴ all of his unwed daughters, and all of his sons and

1. Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1987), 57.

2. Ibid.

3. Rainer Albertz and Rudiger Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion and Ancient Israel and the Levant* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 41.

4. Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 25.

their families.⁵ The foremost authority of the home was the oldest father—the patriarch.⁶ Even if a young man had a wife and children, the young man’s father or grandfather was still the ultimate leader in the home.

In addition to the significance of the patriarch, education was foundational to Old Testament Hebrew families. Despite the fact that schools were never mentioned in the Bible, parents considered their children’s education tremendously important.⁷ Instead of educating the children outside of the home, the mother and father took on the responsibility of teaching them.⁸ In matters of daily instruction, it was usually the father’s responsibility to teach the boys, and the mother’s responsibility to teach the girls. As they were educated in the home, the young children also remained home to help with tasks around the house. As soon as the children could walk, they had duties to perform as a part of the family.⁹ The mother taught her daughters the tasks that she performed around the house.¹⁰ The father, on the other hand, taught his sons to be experts of the family trade.¹¹ Most importantly the parents had the responsibility of training their children in the ways of the Lord, teaching them to follow the Law and to Love the Lord (Deut. 6:6-7).

5. Oded Borowski, *Daily Life in Bible Times* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 22.

6. Leo G Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins and Carol Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 180.

7. J. A. Thompson, *Handbook of Life in Bible Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 83.

8. Gower, 79.

9. Thompson, 83.

10. Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 79.

11. Gower, 79.

Another important feature of Israelite homes was differing gender roles. Although the men and women had different tasks, each of their jobs was vital to the survival of the family. First Samuel 8:11-13 specifically mentioned some of the men's jobs: plowing, reaping, and making tools of war. The women, however, took on a role centered around the home¹²—cooking, baking, sewing,¹³ gardening, caregiving, tending the animals, and making perfume.¹⁴ One of a wife's daily tasks included drawing water.¹⁵ The family needed drinking water as well as water for cleaning hands, dishes, feet, and clothes.¹⁶ In the colder months, keeping a fire lit was important for cooking and warming the house. Other chores and responsibilities included, but were not limited to, grinding flour, preparing food, milking the sheep and goats, and raising, nurturing, and teaching the children. When the children were old enough, they would help their mother with many of the tasks around the house. Spinning, weaving, making clothes, and fashioning baskets were skills that mothers taught their daughters. In this role the wife took care of domestic responsibilities so that the husband could tend the fields and work his trade.

Although Hebrew family members had different responsibilities, they were each extremely family oriented and the result was a cultural emphasis on the survival of the group. Since the culture was not individualistic, each member was more concerned for

12. Phyllis Bird, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," in *Community, Identity, and Ideology*, ed. Charles E. Carter and Carol L. Meyers (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 528.

13. Borowski, 22.

14. Perdue, 24-25.

15. Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible Institute, 1953), 89.

16. *Ibid*, 58.

the health of the family as a whole than for the personal achievements of the individual members. The entire family worked together to ensure that each member was clothed and fed.¹⁷ Focusing predominately on the family unit, individual members forfeited personal goals and identities.¹⁸ Since hard work was key to survival, the family worked from sunrise to sunset to ensure this family success.¹⁹

Before a woman's betrothal, her value in her father's household was measured by how much work she had completed. In fact, the man who was to marry her paid her father for losing his daughter as a worker.²⁰ The woman was continuously under the authority of a man.²¹ She was under her father's authority while he was living and under a brother or uncle's authority if her father died. Upon marrying, she was transferred to the authority of her husband.²² For the most part, a woman did not own property. Even if her father died, the law said that she could not receive an inheritance of property from him. Only if her father had no sons, and if she married in his name, could she receive property from him (Num. 27:1-11, 36:1-15).²³

17. Borowski, 22.

18. Perdue, 21.

19. Ibid., 23.

20. Thompson, 85.

21. Bird, 522.

22. Philip J. King, and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 50.

23. Ibid.

Women, however, were at times influential in public life.²⁴ For example, Deborah, a judge and a wife, played a prominent role in Israel.²⁵ Although the Biblical account of Deborah is not very comprehensive, it is clear that people sought out her judgment and guidance. Since a woman was constantly under the authority of a man, a female judge was rare in Israel. Yet, although she was occasionally directly involved in the public sphere, a woman had the most influence in her own home. In the Hebrew culture, working hard in the home was an honorable activity for the wife to pursue; this is where she found her significance in a male-dominated culture. Even though she was viewed differently than men, she was still treated with honor.²⁶

Understanding the Hebrew culture gives glimpses into the Proverbs 31 wife's daily challenges, expectations, and responsibilities. Using this understanding as a backdrop to the Proverbs 31:10-31 passage, one becomes familiar with the opportunities she had as a woman in Israel to build her character. Although she was always under the authority of a man and she was not allowed to own land in her own right, she also had significant responsibilities, expectations, and challenges that required her to work from early morning to late at night. The following analysis of Proverbs 31 reveals how her daily challenges trained her to become the excellent wife of that is described here.

24. Albertz, 56.

25. Thompson, 88.

26. Ibid.

Verse by Verse of Proverbs 31:10-31

In a male-dominated culture, the Proverbs 31 chapter is an unexpected pearl of insight into the character of an excellent wife. The passage delineates her inner beauty, justifying the praise she receives in the final verses. The essence of the excellent wife in Hebrew culture become clear as one studies the individual verses from the passage.

Verse 10

The author of Proverbs 31 begins this passage of scripture with the words: “An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels” (Prov. 31:10, ESV). This verse begins with a question, perhaps to emphasize the rarity of such a noble wife.²⁷ Such a wife, as described in this passage, was rare and priceless, “more precious than jewels.” It also implies that a noble wife cannot be found without God’s help.²⁸ This verse sets the tone for the entire passage as it exalts the excellent wife and her efforts to care for her household.

The Hebrew word *chayil*²⁹ is used in construct form (*'eshet chayil*) to describe the wife. Only in Proverbs 31, Proverbs 12, and Ruth 3 is *chayil* used to describe a woman as “noble,” “valiant,” or “excellent.”³⁰ Proverbs 12:4 indicates: “An *excellent* wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones” (Prov. 12:4; emphasis added). The word *chayil* in Ruth likewise underscores the high virtue of Ruth; Boaz says to Ruth soon after he wakes and finds her lying at his feet: “And now,

27. Roland Murphy, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 154.

28. John Miller, *Proverbs* (Scottsdale, PA: Harold Press, 2004), 296.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a *worthy* woman” (Ruth 3:11; emphasis added).

To fully understand the word *chayil* as it describes the wife, one must consider how the Bible uses the word to describe men of high caliber. Sometimes in Scripture the word is translated as “army” or “forces,” “riches” or “wealth,” or “warriors.”³¹ For example, in 1 Samuel 14:52 the word *chayil* describes a man that Saul chose to help protect him during battle. In this case *chayil* described someone valiant enough for Saul to want his assistance. In another example found in Genesis 47:6, the Pharaoh told Joseph that any *chayil* man he finds should be put in charge of the Pharaoh’s livestock. Although this may not have been the most prestigious job, Pharaoh trusted Joseph to choose a valiant, excellent, and worthy man. Finally, Exodus 18:21, 25 also uses *chayil* to describe men with the ability to lead and be “judges” over many people; these men were helpers to Moses. God used the voice of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, to guide him in finding *chayil* men to be judges over Israel. This was no small task, because the position of judge over Israel was a position of leadership. The judges were trusted to act in the place of God, the Great Judge. It was their job to decide who was right and who was wrong in a variety of scenarios. According to the English Standard Version, a man described merely as “able” could not perform the position. This man needed to be a man of character, high morals, responsibility, and wisdom. Clearly, all of the instances of the word *chayil* indicate character of high distinction. Proverbs 31 is no exception. The wife described in the 21 verses is obviously a description of a woman of high distinction.

31. W. E. Vine and Merrill F. Unger, *William White Jr. Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1996), 22.

Verse 11

Verse 11 expounds on the wife's worth by noting some of the benefits she brings to her husband: "The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain." Even though, in the Hebrew culture, women *appeared* to be valued less than men, the excellent wife in verses 10 and 11 is deemed truly priceless.³² The word translated as "gain" is the Hebrew word *salal*³³ which means "plunder" or "spoils."³⁴ Therefore, verse 11 created an image in the reader's mind. The wife was to be a great warrior for the family, bringing home the spoils from her ventures. She was not the breadwinner of the home, providing the majority of the income to support the family, but she did bring home her gain from her many endeavors. As a wife she blessed her husband physically, spiritually, and financially.

Verse 12

Verse 12 gives more evidence of the wife's contribution to her husband: "She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life." The good that "she does him" not only includes material benefits, but also moral, and spiritual blessings.³⁵ In addition, the phrase "*all* the days of her life" (emphasis added) demonstrates a lasting marriage. The

32. This, in fact, represents difference in function which determines position and realm of authority.

33. Ellen F. Davis, "Surprised by Wisdom: Preaching Proverbs," *Interpretation* 63, no. 3 (July 2009), 264.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Temper Longman, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 543.

remainder of Proverbs 31 gives additional insight into the many ways that she blesses her husband and family, not just temporarily, but for the rest of her life.³⁶

Verse 13

Verse 13 of Proverbs 31 reads: “She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.” This verse depicts the wife as a hard worker, working diligently and wisely. Whether she went into the market place to get the wool and flax,³⁷ or collected it from her own sheep and garden, is unknown. Regardless, she had to *seek* the wool and flax and *work* with willing hands. Since wool and flax were necessary items for a Hebrew family, she had to acquire them. If, by chance, she actually purchased the flax and wool, as opposed to gathering them from her own field and sheep, there was still a significant amount of labor required to produce a finished and useful product out of such material. Since sheep were so prevalent in the Hebrew culture, wool was a very basic commodity. A large portion of the garments people wore consisted of wool. As mentioned later in Proverbs 31, the most obvious use for wool by the excellent wife was to make clothing and items to sell. Flax, although less common, was also grown and used by the excellent wife.³⁸ Linen came from flax and was the result of putting the flax through several processes.³⁹ First, the flax stalks needed to be softened; this was done by soaking them.⁴⁰

36. Longman, *Proverbs*, 543.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Thompson, 178.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, 149.

Next, the stalks were dried by spreading them out on the roof.⁴¹ After the stalks dried, they were crushed and beaten; then they were spun into thread to make linen garments.⁴² The best linen came from Egypt.⁴³ It was a fairly expensive fabric, and because it was so costly, was usually only worn by the upper class.⁴⁴

Aside from garments, both flax and wool were known for their use as oil lamp wicks.⁴⁵ The flax seeds were used to make oil, which happened to be one of the most readily available oils.⁴⁶ The woman of excellence most likely used flax stalks to make cord and rope⁴⁷ for use around the house and for material to wrap scrolls.⁴⁸ It is evident that this diligent wife had neither an idle mind nor idle hands.

Verse 14

Verse 14 states: “She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar.” This verse seems different from all of the others in that it refers to her spending extra money—“bringing...from afar,” rather than saving money or working hard. Due to the amount of hard work the Proverbs 31 wife invested in saving the family money, one must wonder why she would be willing to spend any extra money for food from afar. This verse appears to imply that she brought variety and elegance into her household with

41. Thompson, 149.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 150.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., 179.

47. Ibid., 137.

48. King, 152.

items that were not locally grown or sold. Although the family enjoyed homegrown food and food from the market, she intended to bring variety into life in the home with these special purchases. This bread or food from afar might have been a delicacy and treat for the guests since hospitality was extremely important in the biblical Hebrew family's home. Although there were many traditions associated with hosting a guest in one's home, one of the paramount traditions was to serve them a meal.⁴⁹ Serving special food would be one of the wife's ways of making her guests feel welcome.

Verse 15

The diligent wife's dedication shines further in verse 15: "She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens." The excellent wife was fully committed to her household. This verse reflects her desire to fulfill her role in the home at all cost. She did not hesitate to rise before the sun to make sure that food was ready. She worked hard and, as mentioned in verse 13, did her work with pleasure. The wife in Proverbs 31 was an exemplary figure who lived out the advice later articulated by Paul in Colossians 3:23-24: "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."

Although getting up in the night was one of this wife's many chores, there were also seasons when the fieldwork was particularly demanding.⁵⁰ Those working in the fields left the house in time to arrive at the field by daybreak, only to leave the field as

49. Wight, 76.

50. Borowski, 26.

late in the day as possible.⁵¹ With such demanding and early hours, the wife needed to wake up even earlier to provide food for the hungry workers.⁵²

Verse 16

The diligent wife's hard work was not merely confined to the home but also branched out to other areas of life: "She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard" (v. 16). This investment in land was a reflection of her wisdom in expanding the blessings the Lord had already given her. She was wise to put a small portion of money and work into the land. Tending it, she could work hard with her hands, making the land fruitful. This was one of the many ways she, like a warrior, conquered and brought back plunder (Prov. 31:11).

This picture of her buying and profiting from land is also an example of good stewardship. The Lord blessed her with profits from her hard work and she chose to spend them in such a way that her blessings increased. She was not like the servant that Jesus spoke of, burying the money from his master; instead she was like the other two servants who doubled what their master gave them (Matt. 25:14-30).

Verse 17

Even though women are rarely described as physically strong or imposing, verse 17 does just that: "She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong." The "strength" in this verse could be referring to physical strength, spiritual strength⁵³ or strength of character. The phrase "makes her arms strong" first emphasized physical

51. Borowski, 26.

52. Ibid.

53. Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 525.

strength. This excellent wife worked hard with the strength she had, and in return, got stronger. For example, while making bread, kneading the dough strengthened her arms and hands.

Because the Hebrew society was a task-driven society, the honor that was shown the Proverbs 31 wife was not given because of the household she was born in, nor because of the status of her husband, but because of the strength of her character. Honor and value followed women who were strong in character and productive in their work. In some ways the entire Proverbs 31 poem is centered on such strength of character that she possesses. Hence, the poem is a testimony to the wife's strength of body as well as character.

Her spiritual strength was a gift from the Lord to protect her. Second Timothy cautions that Satan is in the world just waiting to take the weak away to destruction: "Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (3:5-7). Even though those who read Proverbs 31 when it was first written would not consider 2 Timothy to understand the excellent wife, readers today can use this warning from Paul to understand the strength of the diligent wife. The weak women in these verses are described in three ways: burdened by sin, led astray, and ignorant to the truth. The wife in this passage is described as strong; she was not burdened by sin because she feared and trusted in the Lord. She was not led astray; she was where the Lord wanted her. Lastly she was not ignorant of the truth, because she depended on the Lord and knew His truth.

Verse 18

Continuing in Proverbs 31, the next verse states: “She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night” (v. 18). This verse does not indicate what kind of profit her merchandise brings her, only that the profit is beneficial. Likely it is a monetary profit from a business, such as selling garments and sashes, as referenced in verse 24. In addition, verse 18 implies that she “had evaluated” the situation; she took the time to “perceive” that her merchandise was profitable. She concluded that her hard work was worth the profit. Even though her life was stretched in many ways, involved in many tasks, and was full of numerous roles, her profit was good.

As for the second part of verse 18, “her lamp does not go out at night,” many scholars suggest that this means that not only did she awaken early in the morning to provide food for her household, but that she also stayed up late into the night.⁵⁴ Her hard work, diligence, and sacrifice demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility and reliability. Clearly, she had long days and balanced work and sleep to remain healthy enough to live not only a productive life, but a God-filled life, as mentioned later in the chapter.

Although most people assume this part of the verse lauds her hard work, even into the night, insight into Hebrew culture sheds another possible meaning. Since the wife’s job was to light the lamps, she had to strategically “time” the lighting of the lamps.⁵⁵ If the lamps were lit too late, the house was vulnerable to thieves and other invaders. If the

54. Longman, *Proverbs*, 544.

55. Matthews, 26.

lamps were lit too early, they went out in the middle of the night.⁵⁶ The excellent wife was faithful to *not* let her lamp go out at night; her character displayed excellence, responsibility, and reliability. This godly character is endorsed throughout the scriptures. Jesus urged godly character when he exclaimed, “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much” (Luke 16:10). Just as the men needed to lead in the home, the wife needed to be responsible and disciplined in her duties at home. Even though these duties undoubtedly seemed meaningless at times, it honored God when the wife in Proverbs 31 accomplished her tasks with excellence.

Verse 19

Proverbs 31:19 is a practical verse: “She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.” The distaff and the spindle were used in the process of spinning and weaving flax or other fibers.⁵⁷ She spun and wove tapestries, clothes and other essentials for her home;⁵⁸ she also made garments, wall hangings, and ornate decorations for her family, friends, and business. The Proverbs 31 wife’s gifting and knowledge of hospitality and esthetics echoes God’s creativity and service. Although the passage does not go into detail over how the wife used her spinning and weaving, she used the creativity that the Lord had given her to piece together garments or decorations. Then she wisely used these items to clothe her family, to serve others, or to gain a profit in her business.

56. Matthews, 26.

57. King, 152.

58. Ibid.

Verse 20

Verse 20 especially addresses the woman in relation to her community: “She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.” In the Hebrew culture, it was common for women to play a large part in their community and impact those around them.⁵⁹ Verse 20 specifically addresses the excellent wife’s ministry and work with the poor and needy. The full counsel of scripture regularly commands this type of ministry. In fact, other verses in Proverbs further support the idea of ministering to the poor and needy: “Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor. (Prov. 14:21); “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.” (Prov. 14:31); “Whoever mocks the poor insults his Maker” (Prov. 17:5). Clearly the poor and needy are important to God; He wants His followers to remember and help the poor. The wife’s involvement in the lives of the needy gives evidence to her heart for those around her and her strong desire to obey the Lord.

Verse 21

The excellent wife also planned ahead for her household: “She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet.” Although rare in the Middle East, snow is more common in Jerusalem, which may be an indication of where the wife lived. No matter her physical location, the excellent wife not only worked hard to accomplish work for the present, she also prepared for the future and the needs and challenges that might present themselves. In the same way, she was not a procrastinator.

59. R. E. Clements, ed., *The World of Ancient Israel* (New York, NY: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1989), 372.

Interestingly, the fact that her household was clothed in scarlet demonstrated her wealth.⁶⁰ Scarlet was an expensive cloth. The Hebrew wording indicated that the scarlet may have been doubled to aid in warmth. This significantly increased the worth of the fabric.⁶¹ The use of this expensive cloth is also an indication that the Lord had blessed her and her household. Since she worked hard, they had not only what they needed, but also above and beyond what they needed.

Verse 22

Once again, in verse 22 it is apparent that the excellent wife was always tirelessly working: “She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple” (v. 22). Making bed coverings and fine clothing represented another part of her busy schedule. Through her actions, she continually exhorted the reader (and all of those watching her) to similarly work hard with excellence, diligence, and soundness of mind. The practical side of the verse speaks of bed coverings, a necessary item for sleeping comfortably and warmly. The less practical part of the verse refers to her clothing of “fine linen and purple.” She was practical, yet she knew how to treat herself. From previous verses in Proverbs, it is clear that because she was a planner, a hard worker, and a servant, she had the luxury of an occasional indulgence. Yet even though this devoted wife had fine clothes and valued a nice appearance, it is obvious that she was neither proud nor overly self-indulgent.

60 “Scarlet.” In *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), accessed March 25, 2014, <http://www.liberty.edu:2048/login?url=http://literati.credoreference.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/content/entry/litsymb/scarlet/0>.

61. Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: Volume 17* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 179.

Verse 23

Verse 23 points out that the wife's husband sat in a place of authority: "Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land." Since the wife was so faithful at home, the husband was able to be at the gates with the elders. It is no surprise that the excellent wife was married to a wise and godly man. Proverbs 14:1 declares, "The wisest of women builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down." God builds; yet without His wisdom, the house is torn down. Likewise, with the Lord's wisdom a wife can help to support her husband. Such a wife is a treasure to her husband: "An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones" (Prov. 12:4).

Verse 24

The wife in this passage even started her own business: "She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant" (v. 24). Here in this verse we see yet another example of how the diligent wife contributed to her husband's wealth with her handiwork and ventures. She supplemented her husband's support for the family, diligently using her resources. Being a seamstress and engaging herself with weaving and sewing enabled her to help provide for her family by making clothes as well as selling them.

Verse 25

The Hebrew word 'oz that is translated "strength" in verse 17 is the same word that is used in verse 25: "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come" (v. 25). The definition of this Hebrew word is "power, might, i.e., a condition in which one can exert great force or withstand great force, with a focus of having ability to

do what is desired, intended, or necessary.”⁶² In addition to her strength, this verse describes the excellent wife’s dignity. The Hebrew word used for dignity is also a word with many meanings including: “glory, splendor, i.e., what is beautiful and instills awe and ascribing high value or status to what is majestic.”⁶³ The wife’s attitude and demeanor admirably demonstrate how diligently she seeks to serve her family. Just as “clothing may display style and status, so her demeanor displays strength and honor.”⁶⁴ She carried herself in a way that displayed dignity. She demonstrated daily strength and excellence. Considering the status of women in Hebrew culture, “strength and dignity” were not words commonly associated with females. The wife in this passage, however, earned that description; strength and dignity were her clothing.

In addition to these qualities, the diligent wife described in this verse laughs at the future; this shows she was not a woman of fear. Rather than living in anxiety about the future, she gained her strength from the Lord’s joy: “For this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). Since she gathered her strength and dignity from the Lord, she was neither anxious nor worried about the future. Since God was her foundation, she appeared firm and unmoving with no reason to fear. She feared the Lord, and He blessed her.⁶⁵

62. James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), n.p.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Longman, *Proverbs*, 546.

65. Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 36.

Verse 26

The Lord blessed her with wisdom and kindness: “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue” (v. 26). In Israel, the mother taught her children until they were married. The Proverbs 31 wife poured wisdom into her children, teaching them in kindness to fear the Lord and to make wise choices. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament instruct women to encourage younger women at home and in the community.⁶⁶ Paul gave this instruction in Titus 2:3-5: “Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands.” This task of mentoring, discipling, and encouraging the younger women constituted an important role for the older, mature women.

Verse 27

The mature and wise wife of Proverbs juggled the many responsibilities in the home with excellence: “She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness” (v. 27). This noble wife loved her home and family. The Hebrew culture taught her the importance of commitment to family and hard work. This commitment did not allow idle hands. Instead, she worked hard, diligently, and joyfully with all of her strength. This was her way of honoring the Lord. Clearly, she took care of her household well.

66. Duane Garrett, *The New American Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Volume 14* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 251.

Verse 28 & 29

In verses 28-29, the wife and mother of Proverbs 31 reaps the praise she earned: “Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: ‘many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.’” The excellent wife diligently performed her duties as well as worked hard from early in the morning to late at night; in her Hebrew culture that was the most honorable thing a woman could do. In response her children value and praised her. Her husband also gave her praise. He boasted about her and gave her glory for being a wife who feared the Lord and ran the household well. This was significant for the husband, the leader of the house and her “master,” to acknowledge her worth.

The word they used for “excellently” (*chayil*) was the same word used at the beginning of the poem meaning “noble,” “valiant,” or “excellent.”⁶⁷ Hence, in verse 29, no longer is she just “excellent” or “noble,” she is the most “excellent.” It is no wonder that this wife’s husband praised her for her impeccable character; she was the epitome of what was valued in the Hebrew culture.

Verse 30

Verse 30 uses potent words to warn against superficial charm and beauty; “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” “Charm” is a word meaning “beauty, grace, i.e., an act. or object which gains a favorable response, beautiful to see or hear.”⁶⁸ Yet, this verse calls these things a “lie.”⁶⁹ Similarly,

67. Miller, 296.

68. Swanson, n.p.

69. Ibid.

the word vain carries fierce meanings of *worthlessness* and *emptiness*.⁷⁰ After revealing the deceptive qualities of charm and beauty, the verse contrasts them with a woman who fears the Lord. The excellent wife experienced reverence and awe simply in knowing the Lord. This fear of the Lord made her worthy of praise. Although the cultural context has changed over the years, these words of wisdom still hold their value. Women are always wanting to be charming and beautiful. However, no matter the culture, charm is still a lie and beauty is still worthless, but the fear of the Lord is worth everything.

Verse 31

This last verse is a command to the people around the excellent wife: “Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates” (v. 31). Hence, this verse is saying that she deserves a reward and that it should not be withheld from her. She has labored hard and been faithful; she has feared the Lord and made wise decisions. She is a godly wife and her works should be praised. As the chapter has described the wife’s hard labors and consistent faithfulness readers can understand the high character qualities that she possessed. Those understanding the Hebrew culture can see that within the culture she was noble, possessing the character qualities that people deemed highly valuable. After describing the many admirable attributes of the wife, the chapter closes by condoning others to honor and respect her.

Conclusion

Focusing on the excellent wife, Proverbs 31 discloses the essence of what a godly wife should be within the Hebrew culture. Even though ancient Israel was a patriarchal society, a girl was reared as a young homemaker in training to become an excellent wife,

70. Swanson, n.p.

and she therefore held a very important role in the home and the community. She ran the household and reared a family while her father or husband worked a trade. Understanding the society she was raised in sheds light on her values. According to Proverbs 31, the excellent wife displayed many noble qualities including: diligence, joyfulness, resourcefulness, generosity, strength, wisdom, kindness, creativity, and commitment. Some of her vocational skills included: being a hard worker, running home-based businesses, and being trustworthy with finances. These three qualities made her stand out within her culture, because the culture valued such a strong work ethic, resourcefulness, and faithfulness. The author of Proverbs 31:10-31 skillfully expresses the essence of the excellent wife. Together the verses proclaim the virtues the wife worked diligently to exhibit. The extraordinary life she lived was not an easy path; her hard work, willing spirit, and fear of the Lord was noticed and she was honored accordingly.

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