

Demystifying the  
Proverbs 31  
Woman



## Chapter 2

### Read: Proverbs 31:10-18

**Opening Prayer:** Lord God, heavenly Father, You never rest from Your labors in providing for us all that is needed for this body and life, from food and clothing to Word and Sacrament. You neither slumber nor sleep as You give us Your gifts. Grant that we may ever receive them with humility and thankfulness in the name of Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### Key Term for This Chapter

**Chayil:** Hebrew word used to describe the woman of Proverbs 31: 10– 31. *Chayil* means “strength, worth, excellence.” We will refer to this word often throughout this study. (See below for more about how this word is used in this poem).

### Introduction

As previously mentioned, Proverbs 31: 10– 31 is the final piece in the collected writings that make up the Book of Proverbs. It brings the Proverbs full circle with its focus on a wise and worthy woman. This woman is seemingly an enigma. There are different theories as to “who” she is and what she means for us. By the end of this study, we’ll have explored the major possibilities, as well as how they connect to Christ. To begin, we’ll take a close look at each verse of this oft-read acrostic poem. In this chapter, you’ll see how the individual verses in the first section of the poem, verses 10– 18, connect to other verses of the Bible, and you’ll explore some of the more important Hebrew words and their translation into English.

### Verse-by-Verse Analysis of Verses 10– 18

**10.** *An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.*

The Hebrew word translated in the ESV as “excellent” has several different meanings. The noun form of this word (Hebrew, *chayil*) comes from the verb

(*chul*). This verb means “be firm, strong.” It is used particularly in situations regarding military might (other uses of the verb include strength and even “army”). The noun derived from the verb is listed in the *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (henceforth BDB) as meaning “strength,” “efficiency,” “wealth,” and “army.” Steinmann adds “valor,” “bravery,” and “military prowess.” The third use listed in BDB as efficiency or ability is listed as “often involving moral worth.” Here, Proverbs 31: 10 is listed as one of the sample passages for this meaning. For his translation, Steinmann chooses to say “strong character.” Certainly, this is a main meaning of this text. However, the idea of physical strength will recur thematically in the poem, for instance in verse 17 (“She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong”— though this is a different Hebrew word). Therefore, the militaristic connotations of the original Hebrew word should certainly be kept in the forefront of our minds. We might even want to think of the phrase as “a woman of valor or of strength.”

Steinmann’s use of “strong character” does echo some of the militaristic connotations, and it looks back to the previous pericope (vv. 1– 9), wherein a mother gives a son advice concerning the strength of his own character, especially as king. In fact, the very same word is used in verse 3: “*Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.*” There definitely seems to be a “both/and” dichotomy at play here with the full weight of the meaning of this word wrapped up in both the idea of strong moral character and militaristic connotations of strength. Tom R. Hawkins agrees that both physical and moral strength should come to mind when we see this word as it refers to the woman.

*Chayil* also connects to other passages that use this same word. Within Proverbs, the word is used in **Proverbs 12: 4**: Here the emphasis is on the meaning of “worth” or “strong character.” Like in Proverbs 31: 10– 31, it is clear here, from the contrast given, that a wife who is faithful and possesses *chayil* is desirable.

Outside of Proverbs, the special use employed here in terms of worth, efficiency, and ability recurs in Ruth. **Ruth 3: 11**, Boaz tells Ruth that the entire town knows she is a “worthy woman.” Additionally, the word is used of Boaz

himself when he is introduced by the narrator in 2: 1 (there the word is often translated as “wealth,” though it should also be understood as “worthy”). It is used again in adverbial form in the blessing pronounced on Boaz in ***Ruth 4: 11***. Ruth and Boaz are both people who act in accord with Yahweh’s *chesed*— His steadfast love. For this reason, they are considered worthy. We’ll explore the connections between Ruth and Proverbs 31: 10– 31 more closely in chapter 8.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION 1:** What are some of the meanings of the Hebrew word *chayil*, the main word that describes the woman? How do the different meanings manifest themselves in the woman as she is so far described in these verses?

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The second line of this couplet emphasizes the treasure that a wife of “strong character” is. “She is far more precious than jewels.” In an immediate sense, the comparison demonstrates that the woman is priceless. Jewels are expensive and rare, items fit for kings and queens, and even for the temple of the Lord, but not for everyday people. This is high praise indeed.

Yet the use of the idea of “jewels” also highlights the woman’s connection to wisdom. Wisdom herself is compared to precious metals and jewels: ***(Proverbs 8: 10– 11)***. Proverbs 8 is Wisdom personified as a woman, and she is speaking about herself. Wisdom and what she has to impart is far better than any jewel fit for a king.

***Job 28:12-19*** reiterates the high value of wisdom:

In other words, wisdom is more valuable than anything else in this world— it is, in fact, priceless. It is so rare and precious that only God Himself knows the way to it, Job declares. Job then equates wisdom with the fear of the Lord as he quotes Yahweh: **(Job 28: 28)**. (Remember that for believers the fear of the Lord includes awe, but also faith and trust in Him above all things.)

The worth of the wife of strong character and strength, who is more precious than jewels, is similar to the worth of wisdom— that is, the fear of the Lord. As the poem goes on, it will further detail her worth, and in so doing, more connections are made to wisdom.

**11.** *The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.*

The husband can trust in a wife such as the one who is of strong character, strength, and valor, and whose price is above jewels. In the initial nine chapters of Proverbs, the father instructing his son recommends wisdom to him in the way that one would recommend pursuing a proper bride. The contrast is the woman of adultery. Such a woman is not to be trusted, but a woman of strong character and valor, who is priced above jewels, just as wisdom is, is trustworthy. Elsewhere, the Proverbs speak to the excellence of a good wife who is a gift. **(Proverbs 19: 14)**.

The second part of this couplet is also interesting in that it expounds in terms of militaristic speech on what gain there is in having such a wife. What the ESV translates as “no lack of gain” is the Hebrew word, roughly, *shalal*. This word means spoils, as in the plunder of war, or that which is taken from defeated enemies. In **Proverbs 1: 13**, it is used negatively when the wicked try to entice the young man to come and steal from their neighbors. In **Proverbs 16: 19**, it refers to plunder taken from enemies who have been defeated. Here it carries the sense of that which is won for the husband by the strength and valor of the wife who, in a sense, plunders their enemies to his gain. So here again, we have a recurrence of military vocabulary.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION 2:** Where do you see a connection between the woman and wisdom in this verse?

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**12.** *She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.*

Steinmann contrasts this with Proverbs 1:13 because it connects with the idea of “spoils” in the previous verse. Unlike the thieves, who experience an early death, the woman’s life is long with “all the days of her life” also pointing toward the idea of eternal life. Her virtues are in direct contrast to the gang of thieves in 1:13. The father speaking to his son in chapter 1 warns him of the end the thieves will experience: **Proverbs 1:15-19**

In contrast, the husband who possesses a wife of noble character, the opposite of these thieves, will have good gain and find that she, unlike the thieves, does him good as long as she is living and also eternally.

**13.** *She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.*

This verse introduces the theme of handcrafts that recurs in **Prov. 31: 19, 21, 22, and 25**. She is hardworking and delights in that work. Not only will the husband have good gain from her strength and noble character but also through specific activities in which she engages with eagerness.

Wool and flax would be the raw materials for different kinds of textiles. This means that she would likely have to prepare it further herself in order to use it in her other endeavors. She is able to seek out and acquire that which is needed to carry out her work and duties in caring for her household.

## EXCURSUS: Household Economy

At first glance, when we see the woman in the poem buying and selling, especially as it regards her small textile “business”, our modern sensibilities (which assume this type of “progress” is extremely recent), think that this must be something rather extraordinary in the woman of Proverbs 31:10-13. After all, women in “those days” didn’t have any freedom, autonomy, or economic role, right? However, the assertion of total female disempowerment is a myth. Historical study reveals that the work of the Proverbs woman is rather typical for a middle- to upper-middle-class Mediterranean woman of the time. Scholar Bernhard Lang reveals in his essay that all of the work described in this biblical poem is realistic to the historical time period, although the woman is likely described as doing more of these tasks at once than would have been possible.

Generally speaking, there were two spheres of economic life: that which took place outside of the household and was carried out by the husband (here probably agricultural) and was the basis for the home economy, and that which was carried out by the wife to supplement the family’s economic life and to provide some liquid assets for her. The wife’s sphere typically encompassed food and textiles, including weaving, spinning, and the making of clothing to be used in the household or sold for profit. The wife would likely have instructed her servants in the proper procedure and participated herself. She would not, however, have been doing all of this weaving alone.

Furthermore, Lang uses **1 Samuel 2:19** to posit that the mother of the household would likely have made new garments for all family members yearly. He notes that she would also have produced goods to be sold in the public square and likely could become wealthy through such work. We see this echoed in **Prov.31: 18 and 24**, and Lang notes that a later Jewish Midrash (commentary from a rabbi) also supports the idea that a woman can acquire wealth through her spinning and textile work. The apocryphal book Tobit also depicts a woman who makes money by her weaving, though in very different circumstances. Hannah/Anna is the wife of Tobit, who becomes blind. She earns income to support them through her weaving.

So the husband’s economic role forms the basis for the household and provides the wife with the means to care for the domestic side of the household, while also adding to its worth through her activity. Gene Edward Veith Jr. and

Mary J. Moerbe note concerning the work of husbands and wives that the traditional role is that of “the husband as provider, with the wife receiving from him the fruits of his labor, which she then turns into sustenance for the entire family.” The Proverbs 31:10-31 passage reflects this common “household economy” with repeated references to the wife’s work with acquiring food and working with textiles. This role makes her a trustworthy companion for her husband, who can know that she will enhance their family’s life together. The poem then reflects what would have been rather typical or known at the time of its writing with regard to daily life.

**14. *She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar.***

In the realm of commerce, the woman is like a commercial ship because she seeks out in the markets and other places that which is necessary to feed her family. She brings the food from “afar”. The Hebrew word used as a participle here to describe the type of ship (ie. A commercial ship) is also used in noun form in verse 18 to describe the results of the woman’s labor as her merchandise, which can be sold. The focus on feeding the family also recurs in the poem.

**15. *She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household  
And portions for her maidens.***

This verse is packed with meaning. It begins when the woman rises while it is still dark. This obviously points to her diligence and the fact that she is making sure that all things are prepared ahead of time not only for her family, but also for the entire household, which would include all servants. Proverbs 20:13 offers advice on sleep, which the woman here embodies: Read **Proverbs 20:13.** She opens her eyes and does not love sleep in such a way as to be slothful: therefore, she is able to provide food and portions for her whole household. This idea of diligence and preparedness is echoed in verse 18, where the similar concept of keeping her lamps burning in the night is mentioned. Read **Proverbs 31:18.**

Due to her activity and the fact that she does not idolize sleep, the woman is able to “provide food for her household”. Again, this would include not only her husband and children, but any servants of the family and their families as well, as they were all considered a part of the household. In the Old Testament, this particular phrase connects closely to **Ruth 3:14-17.**



Ruth rises before morning and returns to her own household—made up of her and her mother-in-law, Naomi—and returns bearing all that is needed to provide for her household. Her diligence, hard work, and strong character as demonstrated throughout the course of the Book of Ruth result in her ability to “provide food for her household”. The connection between Ruth and the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 will be further explored in Chapter 8.

In the New Testament, the ability to do this faithfully and well is an attribute echoed in the parable of the faithful and wise manager in **Luke 12:42**. The sign of a faithful and wise manager is that all are provided for at the proper time and seasons of the day and of life. The woman has this attribute for which the Lord is looking in the parable.

The ability to provide food is also an attribute of Yahweh for which He is thanked and praised. **Psalm 111:5** Again, this returns to the theme of the fear of Yahweh. The woman’s activity in providing for her household is both a direct result of the fact that she fears the Lord and a gift straight from His hand.

**Discussion Question 3:** How does the woman care for her family? How do her actions in doing so reflect the actions of Yahweh and of Jesus? What are some other ways in which she has similar characteristics to Yahweh.

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*16. She considers a field and buys it;  
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.*

As mentioned above in the excursus, women held a certain amount of economic autonomy in that they could buy and sell goods made with their hands, that most frequently being textiles. What is unclear, however, is how much property women were allowed to own or purchase. Here, the woman is able to “consider”, that is, to assess the value of a piece of land, and then purchase it. Very occasionally, the Bible depicts women inheriting a portion of land. **Genesis 31:14-15**.

It appears as though Rachel and Leah were entitled to inherit a portion of their father's land or estate, but that he had devoured what should rightfully be theirs (not surprising, given Laban's clear greed and trickery). Jacob has been told by God to leave the land of Laban and return to his own country. Rachel and Leah agree to this, in part because they have no inheritance left.

Another place that depicts female ownership of the land is Numbers 27. The daughters of Zelophehad come before Moses and Aaron as they divide up the land by name. Their father has died in the wilderness wandering, and they are his only offspring. They ask for an inheritance in their father's name among their clan. Yahweh tells Moses that their request is right...**Numbers 27:1-11**. The daughters of Job also are given an inheritance among their seven brothers...**Job 42:13-15**. These all are to do, of course, with inheritance of land and not the outright purchase of land. It does seem that the general rule is that men inherit land from their fathers, but there does seem to be some flexibility among the Israelites, which allows for women to at times inherit and possess land. In any case, the woman of Proverbs 31 is able to make this purchase of land. Whether the land is in her husband's name or her own, the point is that she purchases it for the good of her family. As with her weaving, her purchase of the land adds to the household's stability.

She then makes use of the land by planting a vineyard, a new source of income. Her work with textiles brings enough profit to buy seed and hire the labor needed to plant the vineyard.

Beyond that, however, her actions also hearken to prophetic promises. Steinmann points out that "to plant a vineyard" is a Hebrew clause also used in **Isaiah 65:21 and Amos 9:14**. Both of these passages promise that among other forms of restoration and abundance, the Lord's people will again plant vineyards and drink of wine.

### **17. She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong.**

The verb for "strength" in this sentence is from the Hebrew word *oz*, so it is different word that in **Proverbs 31:10**. The theme of physical and moral strength, however, recurs here with the idea of the woman dressing with strength and making her arms strong. Steinmann notes that this type of strength is mentioned earlier, **Proverbs 24:5**. This strength is a gift of the Lord and is in the Lord, who is

our strong tower (Proverbs 18:10) **Proverbs 14:26**. The word used here recurs in verse 25 of this poem, drawing tight connections between the different parts of the poem.

Here, the idea that she dresses herself in strength may have both physical and metaphorical meanings. Metaphorically, as discussed above, it would be in reference to the strength Yahweh gives. Physically, it may refer to the fact that the woman is readying herself for her day's labor by cinching a belt around her waist in order to hold her skirt up a bit and give more ease to her movements. The word for strength could also function adverbially to give the idiomatic Hebrew phrase "she girds her loins", more often used of men. **Exodus 12:11; 2 Kings 4:29**

Similarly, the phrase in the second clause of "she makes her arms strong" likely refers to binding her sleeves in order to get to work. This would have a practical application when spinning or weaving, so as not to catch any loose clothing in the process. It also further solidifies her character as hardworking and eager in her work. A similar idiomatic English phrase suggested by Steinmann is "she rolls up her sleeves". When we say this, we mean the person is really getting to work and diving into her tasks. Whether she literally rolls up her sleeves or not, the point is that she is hardworking and dedicated.

**18. *She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.***  
*Her lamp does not go out at night.*

Again, the theme of the woman's profit from her labors recurs. She has done all that was needed in order to create textiles and other goods that are well made and will turn a profit. She is skilled, hardworking, and well prepared.

The reference to her lamp not going out at night does not mean that she never sleeps. Instead, it means again that she is well prepared and attends to all details. She would make sure that the lamp was filled with enough oil to last through the night. As she will rise before dawn, she will need the light to see her way in the dark as she prepares for the day's tasks and feeds her household. Also, lamps burning through the night provide safety for all members of her household should they need to rise in the night for any reason. Here again, the woman's activity echoes Jesus' discussion of the end times where He admonishes the disciples: **Luke 12:35-37**.

## REST

Twice in this section of the poem, the poet refers to the woman's active nature, even to the point of rising extremely early and to having her lamps burning all night. The woman does not love sleep above work and is not slothful. This is not to say that rest or sleep are evil. We human beings need rest for our bodies as well as our souls. Rest is, in fact, a gift of Yahweh to His people. The gift of rest from our labors is one that Yahweh delights to give us.

The wakefulness of the Proverbs woman, then, is not an injunction to us never to sleep. Rather, the description of her wakefulness is a reminder to us of Yahweh, who constantly cares for us without rest from His labors: **Psalm 121:3-4**

Like the Proverbs woman, Yahweh's lamp does not go out. He does not sleep or rest from the labor of caring for and serving us.

The woman's activity, then, has eschatological import: she is preparing her household for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. She is like a "man of action" ready for whatever may come and is prepared to meet her Lord.

Additionally, on a metaphorical level, the lamp hearkens to descriptions of God's Word and His wisdom. **Psalm 119:105 and Proverbs 6:23**. This directly contrasts with proverbs that refer to the fact that the lamps of the wicked will go out, since their light does not come from Yahweh. **Proverbs 24:20; Proverbs 13:9; 20:20**. The concrete and metaphorical meanings coincide to give us an overall picture of this godly woman. As Steinmann says, "That the godly woman's 'lamp' does not go out even 'in the night'...suggests not only that she works into the night, but also that her enduring faith is continually sustained by God and His Word".

## **CONCLUSION**

The first nine verses of this acrostic poem make up one unit of *chiastic* structure. A *chiasm* is a literary arrangement in which related items are placed at opposite ends, and there is often a central portion that brings out meaning. In Proverbs 31:10-31, verses 10-18 form the first part of the chiasm; verses 19-20 form the central portion; verses 21-29 form the second part of the chiasm; and

verses 30-31 form the conclusion. This arrangement highlights the characteristics of the woman. The seven characteristics of the woman are introduced in these first nine verses. Steinmann notes them this way: strong character(v. 10), benefits her husband(v. 11), good works and wise speech(v. 12), expertise at handcrafts(v.13), industriousness(vv. 14-15, 18), commercial benefit to her family(v. 16) and strength(v. 17). These same seven characteristics will be reiterated in verses 21-29. Steinmann asserts, “This sevenfold characterization is no accident, but is used to signal her comprehensive grasp of all of the godly virtues of an ideal wife. This is consistent with the use of the symbolism of the number seven throughout Proverbs to indicate divine completeness (6:16-19; 6:31; 9:1; 24:16; 26:16; 26:25; 30:11-33) In other words, she is the complete picture of a godly wife.

As we looked through the first nine verses, we also marked when the woman’s characteristics and the descriptions of her reflected or were exactly like those of Yahweh or divine Wisdom. Her worth is more precious than jewels, just as is Wisdom. Her untiring commitment to providing for her family echoes the psalm’s description of Yahweh as being the one who never slumbers nor sleeps because He is constantly caring for His people. Her attribute of providing food for her family is a characteristic of Yahweh that is praised in many Scripture passages. Finally, the idea of her strength connects to Yahweh as the Strong One who keeps us safe, and to strength as a gift directly from His hand. So while the woman certainly displays clearly the characteristics of a godly wife already in these first nine verses, her connections to Yahweh’s activity and descriptors used of Him show that she may be much more than just a complete picture of godly wife filled with wisdom.

**Discussion Question 4:** What is something about the woman that has surprised you so far?

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