

Chapter 3

Demystifying the

Proverbs 31 Woman



Chapter 3

CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF Proverbs 31:10-18 AND CLOSE READING OF THE CENTRAL UNIT (vv. 19-20)

Opening Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, You have made us Your dear children through Baptism. Help us to live as Your redeemed children as we diligently work in our vocations and reach out our hands to our neighbors in need, that all might be brought to saving knowledge of You: through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Key Term for This Chapter

Chiasm: Structure in a text where related words or phrases are repeated to create a unit with emphasized meanings. It will have the structure ABB'A' or ABCB'A'. The phrases or words in the chiasm mirror each other.

Fulcrum: Central portion of a longer chiasm (not every chiasm has one.) This word or phrase is often set apart by the repeated words or phrases and can be seen as the central idea being emphasized by the chiastic structure.

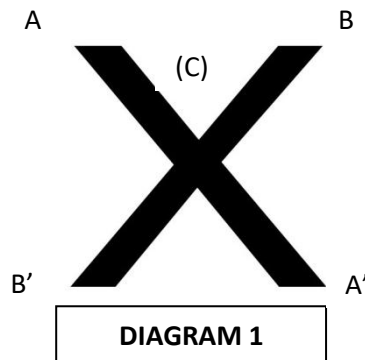
Inclusio: Formed when a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning and end of a portion of text. Serves to bracket off that text for closer inspection.

Introduction

Now that we have taken a close look at the opening unit of the acrostic poem about the wife of noble character, we are in good place to discuss the structure of the poem, and then take a close look at the central couplet. In addition to being an acrostic poem, with each verse beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the poem also has an intricate chiastic structure. Chiasms can bring out meaning and make connections between different portions of a text. They are found frequently in the Scriptures, both in large excerpts as well as in single verses.

The word *chiasm* comes from the Greek letter X(chi). This literary device can be diagrammed like an X, with vocabulary at the beginning and end of a section in reverse order (so the phrases mirror each other). Often, but not always, a chiasm has a central portion called the *fulcrum*, which is highlighted by the chiastic structure.

When diagrammed as an X, it would look like diagram.1



Without a *fulcrum*, you would read the chiasm from left to right to get: ABB'A'. So the phrase or word that is repeated and labeled as A comes at the very beginning and the very end of the unit. The B phrase or word is repeated directly one after another. However, chiasms with the *fulcrum* would be noted as a C, and this would be read from left to right as ABCB'A'.

The first two lines of Genesis 1:27 are an example of a chiastic structure without a *fulcrum*.

A So God Created man
 B in His own image,
 B' in the image of God
A' He created him

Chiasms may also include an *inclusio*, which occurs when vocabulary or a phrase is repeated at the beginning and end of a section, showing that all that goes between those two points should be seen as strongly connected and inform how you do your interpretation. This Genesis passage has an *inclusio* with “created” in both the beginning and the end of this section of the verse, which leaves us with a strong emphasis on the fact that God

created man in His image. The final portion of this verse expands on God's special creation of man, though it is not part of the chiasm: "male and female He created them."

Like Genesis 1:27, only over a lengthier portion of text, Proverbs 31:10-31 is a chiasm with an *inclusio*. It is a tightly structured acrostic poem that uses the structure to highlight characteristics of the woman (Steinmann counts seven repeated characteristics) as well as meaning in the text. At the center of the text, verses 19 and 20 form the *fulcrum* for the whole poem.

Inclusio

An *inclusio* is like verbally putting brackets around a section of text. It sets that portion off and signals us to pay close attention to what is in it. An example of a very long *inclusio* occurs in the Book of Ruth. It begins with the word "sons" in chapter 1:5 and ends with the word "child" in 4:16. This is not obvious in the English, but the word used as "sons" and then as "child" is actually the same Hebrew word with the specific meaning of very young children. In 1:5, it is used to refer to Naomi's adult sons, despite the fact that they are too old to be encompassed by that term. It is used again when Obed is laid in Naomi's lap. The narrator shows, through the use of this word at both ends of this portion of the text, that what was taken from Naomi is restored to her by God at the end of the book. So all that takes place between those two uses of the word is, in a sense, very much so that Naomi's lap might be made full again. This shows God's care and provision for Naomi and also for us as the one who restores all things.

The Chiastic Structure of Proverbs 31:10-31

In his essay on chiasm and symmetry in Probers 31, Murray H. Lichtenstein notes that the poem to the worthy wife is made up of "two symmetrically balanced components followed by a two-verse coda". So, the structure of Proverbs 31:10-31 is this:

First nine-verse unit (vv. 10-18)

Central Chiastic unity (vv. 19-20)

Second nine-verse unit (vv. 21-29)

Final two-verse coda (vv. 30-31)

This reveals both its chiastic structure and its symmetry. The poem consists of two nine-verse sections followed by two two-verse sections. The two nine-verse sections with the central chiastic section are all contained within a chiastic *inclusio*. The Hebrew word *chayil* brackets the *inclusio* plus the phrase “her husband” both creates a chiasm and an *inclusio*. The bold type shows where *chayil* italics is used, and the highlight the phrase “her husband”:

An **excellent wife** who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels.
The heart of *her husband* trusts in her,
And he will have no lack of gain. (vv. 10-11)
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. (vv. 28-29)

Put another way:

A excellent (strong character—Hebrew: *chayil*) (v. 10)

B her husband (v. 11)

B' her husband (v. 28)

A' done excellently (strong character—Hebrew: *chayil*) (v. 29)

The repeated vocabulary in these two sections mirror each other and show that verses 10-29 are to be interpreted closely together.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 1: What is the overall structure of the acrostic poem in Proverbs 31:10-31 (how did we say the text is divided up?)

As we mentioned in chapter 2, verses 10-18 reveal seven characteristics of the woman of “strong character”. These seven characteristics are also highlighted in the second nine-verse unity of the poem. Steinmann diagrams them this way:

Characterization	1st Unit	2nd Unit
Strong Character	31:10	31:29
Benefits her husband	31:11	31:23
Good works and wise speech	31:12	31:26
Expertise at handcrafts	31:13	31:21-22, 24
Industriousness	31:14-15, 18	31:27
Commercial benefit to her family	31:16	31:24
Strength	31:17	31:25

The chiasmic structure serves to highlight the close connection between portions of the text which lead to an emphasis on these seven characteristics.

Additionally, seven is a biblically significant number. It is used to reflect completeness, often referring to Yahweh’s divine completeness. Steinmann notes that the number seven is used throughout the Proverbs specifically to highlight divine completeness and that “this sevenfold characterization is no accident, but is used to signal her [the woman’s] comprehensive grasp of all the godly virtues of an idea wife”.

The seven characteristics of the godly woman reflect both moral/spiritual and practical values. Her moral/spiritual character is praised but, obviously, so are her practical abilities from weaving to procuring food, and so on.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 2: What are the seven characteristics of the woman?

The chiastic structure of the poem extends to a chiasm that is formed by the two two-verse units. Just as the two nine-verse units are linked by way of a chiasm, so too, the two-verse *fulcrum* is linked with the two-verse coda by way of chiasm. The verses read in this way:

She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy (vv. 19-20).
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
But a woman who fears the Lord is to
be praised.
Give her the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates. (vv. 30-31)

The verses are linked chiastically by theme. Steinmann proposes this diagram:

- A** Practical virtue: use of her hands at the distaff and spindle (31:19)
- B** Spiritual virtue by faith: generosity to the poor (31:20)
- B'** Spiritual virtue by faith: fear of Yahweh (31:30)
- A'** Practical virtue: her achievements (*yadeyah;periy*), “the fruit of her hands” and accomplishments (31:31)

Again, this connection between the two two-verse units highlights how highly structured this poem is. There are no accidents as to how it is put together, and the structured format of the chiasms and the symmetry they cause serve to highlight the overall completeness of the woman's moral and practical wisdom and virtue. Like the two nine-verse units, the two-verse *fulcrum* and the two-verse coda both reflect moral/spiritual virtues, as well as practical.

Discussion Question 3: How does the chiastic structure and internal symmetry of the poem highlight important themes, and what themes are those?

Close Reading of Verses 19-20 (*fulcrum*)

As explained above, the center of the chiasm formed by the poem is verses 19-20. These verses essentially summarize all that makes the woman a wife of strong character by highlighting both her practical and her mortal/spiritual virtues.

Proverbs 31:19

In chapter 2, we mentioned that the word *chayil* from verse 10, usually translated “worthy” or “excellent”, had militaristic connotations as well. We suggested, then, that we should keep in mind the ideas of “strength” that came with the other uses of this word. The militaristic or show of strength connotations continued in verse 11 with the idea of “plunder” and verse 15 with the word “prey” (the word for “food” in this verse is the word for “prey” in Hebrew). In verse 17, we saw again phrases that could have a militaristic or strength connotation. She “makes her arms strong” could also refer to strengthening her arms and herself for battle in addition to meaning that she

perhaps “rolls up her sleeves” to get to work. In the same verse, the idea of “dressing” herself with “strength” came from the Hebrew idiom “she girds her loins”, which is most often used of men preparing for battle. The militaristic and strength connotations recur again here in this first verse of the *fulcrum*.

The Hebrew phrase translated in the ESV as “she puts her hands to” (v. 19) has more of a connotation of stretching out your hand to grasp something. Also, the precise makeup of this phrase is used at least twenty times in the Old Testament, most often with an “aggressive or hostile connotation of action ‘against’ someone or something”. In fact, Albert Wolters asserts that the use of this phrase in Proverbs 31 is an exception. And he points out that the same phrase is used in the Song of Debroah; **Judges 5:26**

Jael stretches out her hands and grasps the tent peg and the mallet, which she uses to kill Sisera after lulling him to sleep and safety with warm milk. This is clearly an aggressive moment with militaristic overtones.

Similarly, the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 stretches out her hand and grasps ...the distaff. She mightily and with great strength stretches out her hands to provide for her family through her hard work of weaving, spinning, and sewing. There is an aggressiveness or a fierceness in her work for her family. There is a sense, almost, that the woman “does battle” in order to provide for the needs of her household.

The verse concludes with the parallel phrase “and her hands hold the spindle”, or literally, “her palms grasp the spindle”. Again, this reinforces what the first nine verses have told us about the woman—she “works with willing hands” (v. 13). Given that this is the *fulcrum*, which summarizes and highlights some of the main ideas of the poem and on which the poem pivots, it makes sense that this first phrase would touch on a summary of all the work she has done in the preceding nine verses. The phrases here highlight again her practical virtues, which lead to “gain” for her husband and her family (v.v. 11, 18) food for all her household (v. 15) and the expansion of her family’s

property (v. 16), as well as her strength and warlike posture in carrying them out.

Discussion Question 4: How does this verse once again bring out military connotations? What does it tell us about the woman?

Proverbs 31:20

In this verse, the woman's spiritual/moral virtues are extolled. The woman attends to the needy, not just out of moral obligation, but because of her "fear of Yahweh". The concept of helping the poor and needy is also addressed in Proverbs 31:9, when the mother of King Lemuel gives him instruction in how to rule justly: "Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy". This type of activity is natural for the people of God and part of living life as the "new man".

Romans 12:13

Romans stresses especially caring for those within the household of God ("the needs of the saints"), just as the woman here cares for those with her own household and then beyond.

Care of the poor and needy is part of the law given by God to Moses and the Israelites. Many different regulations assured that the poor would be cared for, such as commands to leave the edges of vineyards and fields unharvested so the poor and sojourners could eat from these portions.

Exodus 23:11; Leviticus 19:10; 23:22

Proverbs 14:21 contrasts those who are unkind with those who are generous to the poor: **Proverbs 14:21.**

Proverbs 14:31 further makes it clear that treatment of the poor is an indication of how one respects Yahweh: **Proverbs 14:31**

It is no surprise then, that the woman who fears the Lord and does *chayilis* a woman who honors Yahweh by opening her hand to the poor and reaching out her hand to the needy.

Interestingly enough, the phrase for “reaches out her hand to the needy” combines two Hebrew words (*paras*—“stretch out” and *kaph*—“hand”, which most often come together to signify prayer to God. **1 Kings 8:22**. Given this nod toward prayer, Steinmann notes that the act of reaching out her hands to the needy becomes “part of her service to God”. She serves God by serving her neighbor in need through the work of her hands. Steinmann says, “A wise wife knows that God has compassion on the poor, and she imitates his provision for the poor”.

Helping or Despising the Poor in Proverbs

Proverbs 19:17; Proverbs 21:13
Proverbs 22:9, 16; Proverbs 28:8, 15, 27
Proverbs 29:7, 14

As you may have already noticed, these two verses that form the *fulcrum* within the overall chiasm formed by verses 10-29 are also themselves a chiasm. In order to better see how it works, it is helpful to more closely follow the word order in Hebrew. The Hebrew words have been put in parentheses so you can see how they repeat:

A **Her hands** (*yad*) **she puts** (*shalach*) to the distaff (19a)

B. *And her palms* (*Kaph*) work the spindle (19b)

B' *Her palms* (*kaph*) she holds out to the poor (20a)

A' **And her hands** (*yad*) **she stretches out** (*shalach*) to the needy (20b)

As is obvious from this depiction of the chiastic structure of the *fulcrum*, it combines and emphasizes that which is highlighted in the first nine verses

and will be highlighted again—the woman’s hardworking, diligent, and even fierce nature, as well as her spiritual worth. Both her willingness to “stretch out her hand” and do battle for her family, as well as to stretch out her palms to the poor and thrust them out toward the needy in generosity are clearly displayed in the first nine verses. She is a worthy wife who “works with willing hands”. “rises while it is yet night”, provides for her family and her fousehold, and “dresses herself with strength”, girding her loins and binding her arms to prepare to do battle for what is best for her family according to her acquired wisdom from Yahweh. These actions, and the actions and characteristics that are further evidence by the next nine verses, are summed up in the work of her hands: in her industriousness and self-sufficiency and also in her generosity.

Discussion Question 5: How do verses 19 and 20 serve as a summary of the depiction of the woman found in the two main chiastic units (vv. 10-18 and 21-29)?

Excursus on Vocation: The Profane and the Sacred Intertwined

In the early twentieth century, the French sociologist Emily Durkheim posited that there were two categories created by adherence to religion: activities, objects, and places set apart as sacred, and everything else—the profane. The Latin word *profane* means simply “outside of the temple”. The profane refers to all the humdrum things of life. While this word now has other more negative meanings, in the context of this spectrum, it means simply that which has not been set apart as sacred. Places, activities, words, and objects can all be set aside as sacred and for a particular sacred use

within a brief system. Often, we despise or at least see as much less important things that are “profane”. In the time of Martin Luther, for instance, this was so in a hyper way. It was thought that the absolute best and highest activity in life was that of the religious life (that is, to live as a nun or a monk). The lives of everyday people were seen as less valuable and certainly profane—outside the temple, not sacred.

However, in the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31, the profane and the sacred meet. On the one hand, what she does in a practical sense is what any middle to upper-class wife and mother of the ancient Near East would do. It is nothing that is set apart as sacred in the obvious sense. It has nothing to do with the temple. It’s extraordinarily ordinary. Food, clothing, property, even her almost round-the-clock hours are ordinary, typical endeavors. Like us, she wipes noses, takes out the trash, drives the carpool, and pairs the socks. These things are so mundane. So seemingly “of the world”. The woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is exceptional only in that as an idealized poetic character, perhaps, she does them all with a fullness of skill and energy that a normal person doesn’t possess.

Then there are the things she does that seem “higher”. The more sacred or at least spiritual things. The way she does her husband good eternally in verse 12 certainly seems to be on a higher moral or spiritual plane than buying a field. Her extreme care of the poor is obviously moral and spiritual. And while much of the poem’s structure highlights these two overall characteristics, they are really one and the same.

What Is Vocation?

In their book *Family Vocation: God’s Calling in Marriage, Parenting, and Childhood*, Gene Edward Veith Jr. and Mary J. Moerbe write that the Christian meaning of vocation “is that God calls us to the different roles that he asks us to play and in which he is active.... It is in our various vocations that we live out our faith in love and service to the various neighbors that God brings into our lives. Not only that, God works in and

through all of these vocations and the unique individuals he calls to fill them, including us”.

In Christ, because of His activity in and through us in our vocations, the profane becomes sacred. The woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 holds the vocations of wife, member of her community, member of the household economy, overseer of the household maidens, and mother.

Within these vocations, she has daily tasks and duties. They may be extraordinarily ordinary, but they are sacred acts, acts of prayer. As she gathers food and lights the lamps, as she rises early and rolls up her sleeves, as she fights for plunder for her household and goes to battle for the needy, as she buys a field and plants a vineyard, the woman’s actions become a prayer and a work of service rendered to Yahweh. By serving her nearest neighbors (husband, children, household servants, etc.) through her vocations, she serves the God who loves and cared for them through her.

As we read through the first nine verses in chapter 2 of our study, we saw how the sacred was hinted at within the seemingly profane. When she rises while it is yet night (31:15) and keeps her lamp from going out a night (v. 18), she mirrors Yahweh’s own activity in that He never slumbers nor sleeps as He does the work of providing for His people and His creation. When she provides food for her household and her servants (v. 15), the phrasing echoes praise given to Yahweh for the same type of provision and care. Even her stated worth as being like jewels hearkens to descriptions of Yahweh’s wisdom (v. 10). The duties that seem like so much drudgery and ordinariness become sacred, and even imitate our Lord, when clothed in Christ and the holy offices He gives unto us. In other words, the woman would not be “better” if she focused less on the practical and more on the “spiritual”. All of these activities are of value and even sacred.

So as it turns out, Durkheim’s separation or spectrum may work for other religions, but it doesn’t work for Christianity in quite the same way.

Why not? Well, because we have a God who enters this earthly life. He is not busy keeping the profane away and compartmentalizing it away from the sacred. Instead, He is working in and through us in tangible, real ways, getting down into the muck of everyday life. As He works in and through us to serve our neighbors, He makes the mundane, humdrum tasks of writing that memo or waiting on table 59 or browning the meat or lifting the patient into bed sacred activities. He creates sacred space and sacred time and sacred activities in and among and out of the profane.

Whatever your vocation may be—mother, daughter, sister, teacher, employee, nurse, doctor, wife, citizen—you can revel in the extraordinary ordinariness of it all and in the God who chooses to work through the ordinary and the profane and make it a sacred act of prayer and service to His people and Himself.

Discussion Question 6: How does the description of the woman tie together the sacred and the profane? How does the profane become sacred in her life and in ours?

Other Resources for Vocation

Vocation is a helpful way for Christians to think about their lives and the places and offices into which God has placed them. A great place to start is the Table of Duties found in the Small Catechism, which lists many vocations and their duties. Luther’s list ranges from “Bishops, Pastors, and Preachers” to “What the Hearers Woe Their Pastor” to “Youth”, “Husbands”, “Wives”, and even “Civil Government”, and more. Of course, this not an exhaustive list, but it helps us see vocation and its duties, as Luther draws them from Scripture.

Other good resources on vocation are ***Family Vocation: God's Calling in Marriage, Parenting and Childhood*** by Gene Edward Veith and Mary J. Moerbe and ***God at Work (Redesign): Your Christian Vocation in All of Life***, also by Gene Edward Veith.

Conclusion

The structure of the poem is important because it helps us see what themes are highlighted and draws further meaning from the text. The *chiasm* between verses 10-18 and 21-29 highlights the woman's seven characteristics: strong character, benefits her husband, good works and wise speech, expertise at handcrafts industriousness, commercial benefit to her family, and strength. This demonstrates her completeness, as well. She has all of the godly virtues of the ideal wife.

The *fulcrum* then helps us to draw more meaning. The focus on the woman's seven characteristics is not really about what she does, but about who she is. The *fulcrum* (vv. 19-20) demonstrates that the woman is strong, capable, and compassionate. It combines her practical and moral virtues. She is faithful in all things. It demonstrates the completeness of her deeds and moral virtues as she cares for her household and for the poor and needy. All of her actions are sacred, no matter how ordinary they appear, because they are done within her vocation as Christ works in and through her.