

Chapter 5

Demystifying the

Proverbs 31 Woman



Chapter 5

Proverbs 31:10-31 and Proverbs 31:1-9

Opening Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, You desire to reveal to us Your Son in all of the Scriptures. Help us to see Him and His gifts of grace, life, wisdom, and mercy throughout the Scriptures, that we may walk in the ways of Wisdom and the fear of You in all of our vocations in life; grant it for the sake of 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

Symmetry: In literature, symmetry occurs when the parts of a poem or piece of work mirror each other in form, creating a “sameness”. This might take the shape of two halves of a piece that are the same with regard to number of lines, vocabulary, length, rhythm, or theme (or several of these characteristics).

Introduction

In the last four chapters, we took a close look at each verse of Proverbs 31:10-31. As we did, we began to note the meanings of individual words and phrases, as well as how they might connect with other Scripture passages. Now that we have a good handle on the poem itself, we’ll start setting it within its context. Later, we will also look at how it connects to other parts of Scripture.

In the next few chapters, we’ll take a more detailed look at how Proverbs 31:10-31 fits into the rest of the Book of Proverbs. We’ll begin by looking at the most immediate context: the first nine verses of this chapter. Scholars seem to be somewhat divided on how closely these two pieces are connected. They generally think that they were not authored by the same person. While we cannot be sure of authorship, it does seem that the two pieces were at least intentionally put together, and that the possibility of

common authorship cannot completely be dismissed. The poems do have more in common than may first meet the eye. We'll look at structural and verbal and thematic similarities, as well as the place of these concluding lines in the whole of the Book of Proverbs.

Structural Similarities

As previously discussed, Proverbs 31:10-31 has a carefully designed structure. It consists of a main body of the poem (vv.10-29), and then a two-verse coda (vv.30-32). Within the main body of the poem, there is a chiastic structure that is divided as verses 10-18 as one unit, verses 19-20 as the central unity or *fulcrum*, and verses 22-29 as the final unit, which corresponds to 10-18. As a reminder, here is how we might diagram the whole poem. In bold you see the words which create the chiastic *inclusio* we discussed earlier. In italics, I have noted similar themes or vocabulary that recur between the two halves of the chiastic structure. The word "strong" is underlined in both halves where the Hebrew word *oz* is used in diagram 2.

Notice that within this overall structure, there is also symmetry. The alternating nine- and two-verse units create a symmetrical balance in the overall structure of the poem. Each of those corresponding sections are also thematically tied. Verses 10-18 and 21-29 focus on an enumeration of the woman's works, actions, and characteristics, while verses 19-20 and 30-31 provide an overall summary of the woman's character (both spiritual and practical virtues), with the addition of praise for her in the final coda, ending the poem on a high culminating note as if everything was building to that moment.

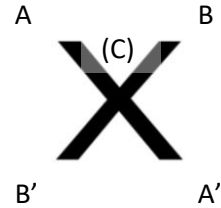
Adding to the strong symmetry and structure of the poem, the two nine-verse sections of the poem are linked by a chiastic *inclusio* between verses 10-11 and 28-29. that can be plotted in this way:

A: “excellent” (Hebrew word *chayil*) (v.10)

B: “her husband” (v.11)

B’ “her husband” (v.28)

A’ “excellently” (Hebrew word *chayil*) (v. 29)



10. An **excellent** wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
11. The heart of **her husband** trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
12. She **does him good**, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
13. She **seeks** wool and flax,
and **works** with willing hands.
14. She is like the ships of the merchant;
she **brings her food** from afar.
15. She rises while it is yet night
and **provides** food for her household
and portions for her maidens.
16. She **considers a field and buys it**;
with the fruit of her hands she **plants** a vineyard.
17. She **dresses herself** with strength
and **makes her arms strong**.
18. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night

19. She puts her hands to the distaff
and her hands hold the spindle.
20. She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy.

21. She is not afraid of snow for her household,
for all her household are clothed in scarlet.
22. She ***makes bed coverings*** for herself;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
23. Her husband is known in the gates
when he sits among the elders of the land.
24. She ***makes linen garments and sells them;***
she ***delivers*** sashes to the merchant.
25. ***Strength*** and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
26. She ***opens her mouth with wisdom,***
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
27. She ***looks well to the ways of her household***
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
28. Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:
29. “Many women have **done excellently,**
but you surpass them all”.

30. Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
31. Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates.

Read Proverbs 31:1-9

Though shorter, the poem of advice from a mother to her son found in verses 1-9 has similarly tight structure. The first verse acts simply to identify the piece, much like the headings on the Psalms (“A Psalm of David on the occasion of . . .”). Then the direct introduction of the content of the poem takes place in a unit of verses 2 and 3. In these verses, the mother laments over her son’s direct actions. Next the scope of the poem widens a bit with a

more general set of advice for all kings in verses 4-9. These six verses make up the main body of the poem, and like verses 10-31, include a highly structured and symmetrical main body unity (vv.4-7) followed by a two-verse coda (vv.8-9). Also similarly to verses 10-31, symmetry is made clear by vocabulary in common between the beginning and end of the main unit. Here, the words for “wine and strong drink” are repeated in reverse order, and each time this is followed by the conceptual idea of forgetting. Additionally, the uses of wine and strong drink are contrasted. One is negative and one is positive, with the resulting forgetting being either negative or positive.

Symmetrical Component A:

not for kings to drink **wine**

or take **strong drink** (v.4)

lest they drink and forget what has been decreed

and pervert the rights of all the afflicted (v.5)

(negative consequence)

Symmetrical Component B:

give **strong drink** to the one who is perishing

and **wine** to those in bitter distress (v.6)

let them drink and forget their poverty

and remember their misery no more (v.7)

(positive consequence)

In the final two-verse coda, as in the main body unity, “symmetry is achieved through verbal and stylistic repetition.” The two-verse coda includes the repetition of an imperative to “Open your mouth,” followed by the thing for which the king should “open his mouth.” This is speaking judicial in nature and includes the duty to defend the rights of others. The word that refers to a judge defending the rights or pleading the case of others is used in both verses, as well (*diyyn*). Interestingly, this word can be used to refer to Yahweh pleading someone’s cause on their behalf. (**Genesis 30:6** Often translated judge but also, pleading a cause. God pleads Rachel’s cause by giving her a

son.) So the king, then, is to act in a righteous way, a way in which Yahweh Himself acts.

Both poems, then, consist of “two symmetrically balanced components, followed by a two-verse coda”. In both poems, a chiasm in the main part of the poem reinforces the symmetry present in the poem. The chiasm found between verses 4 & 6, with the linking reversed terms for wind and strong drink, reinforces the symmetry found in the main unit of this short poem, just as the chiastic *inclusio* in verses 10-11 and verses 28-29 functions in the second poem.

Lichtenstein further points out that just as the first poem uses the repetition of certain words (strong drink, wine, the idea of forgetting), so too the longer poem about the woman of strong character includes verbal repetition between the two parts of the symmetrical chiasm (vv. 10-18 and vv. 21-29). Several Hebrew words recur or are shared by both halves of the poem. He counts fourteen terms in eighteen total verses. I have translated these to English from his reference to the Hebrew word: “household” (vv. 15,21,27); “Husband” (vv. 11,23,28); “belt”/ “sash”/ the word used in the idiom “to gird her loins” (vv. 17,24); strong character/excellently/worthy (vv.10,29); the word translated as “days” in verse 12 and “future” in verse 25; the preposition meaning that for, when, because (*kee*) (vv. 18,21); “all” (vv. 12,21); not (the Hebrew particle for negation) (vv.18,21); “food/bread” (vv. 14,27); “worth/sell” (the root word means merchandise/value/price) (vv. 10,24); “give/deliver” (vv. 15,24); “strength” (*oz*) (vv. 17,25); “works/makes” (vv. 13,22); “rise/arise” (vv. 15,28). Obviously, given the respective lengths of the two poems, there are many more instances of verbal repetition in Proverbs 31:10-31 than in Proverbs 31:1-9; nevertheless, it is a tool carefully used in both poems to further tie together the component parts and show their highly symmetrical structure. Lichtenstein refers to it as a “pervasive symmetry”. He summarizes the structural ties between the two poems in this way:

Both “The Words of Lemuel” and “The Excellent Wife” exhibit pervasive symmetry on a variety of levels: verbal, thematic, and structural. In the main body of the first poem (Prov. 31:4-7) the most striking symmetry is one of ‘equal and opposite’, [as regards its view of intoxication]....In the main body of the second poem (Prov. 31:10-29) the symmetry is, again, one of ‘equal and opposite’, but in the different sense of two components of equal length, identical content and common phraseology echoing, and so reinforcing, each other’s praise of the excellent wife from opposite sides of an intervening poetic unit.

When we place these two poems side by side, there is much they have in common structurally; despite their differing lengths and the fact that the poem about the woman is also structured externally as an acrostic (each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetical order). This helps us not only to see connections between the two poems, and therefore the intentionality with which they were placed together, but also to take a deeper second look at the second poem. The structure of the poem reinforces again the focus on the woman’s consistent strength both physically and as regards her character. The verbal repetition noted by Lichtenstein demonstrates that the two halves of the main chiastic unit are intricately tied together in describing the woman’s character and actions, which are all related to one another in her service of her family and community.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 1: Despite their differing lengths, how are the structures of the two poems similar?

Verbal and Thematic Similarities

In addition to the structural tools employed in both poems, the poems have several words in common, including the important word *chayil*, the Hebrew word for strength/strong character. This important word takes place in the first poem: “Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings” (31:3). The warning from King Lemuel’s mother echoes warnings from the father to his son throughout the early chapters of Proverbs. It underscores the fact that a king should be physically and morally strong and should protect that strength for the sake of his people. Giving it away to women refers to running after those women who are not themselves women of *chayil*. Like the adulterous woman, or Dame Folly, referred to throughout chapters 1-9 of Proverbs, this type of woman seeks to destroy a godly man’s character and faith.

While the word is used in the first nine verses in the sense of a warning, it still indicates that the king has or at one time had *chayil*. Steinmann notes that the masculine counterpart to a woman of strong character is the “man of valor.” When a man is described as having *chayil*, there are generally three emphases: (1) spiritual and moral strength, (2) skill and expertise, and (3) service as a soldier (so the militaristic aspect). The king would have been expected to live up to these standards as a man of *chayil*. Within these standards, King Lemuel should refrain from wine and strong drink to be able to exercise the spiritual and moral strength needed to judge rightly and uphold justice for the poor. He should also speak rightly in such a way as to defend those in need.

The woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is the female counterpart of the “the man of valor”. She is, of course, described with the same word, and the poem goes on to show how her actions and words match her status as “the woman of strong character”. Everything that the mother wishes for King Lemuel to do and be in verses 1-9 is what the woman of 10-31 does and who she is.

Additionally, another overlap in vocabulary has to do with how the king and woman should or do speak. In **Proverbs 31: 8-9**, the concluding coda of the poem returns to an emphasis on the proper role of a king after warning against wine and strong drink. In these verses, the words “open your mouth” are echoed by the words said of the woman in **Proverbs 31:26**. While the two instances in verses 8 and 9 are in the imperative tense and the verb in verse 26 is not, the root word in all three verses that is used to mean “open” is the same, as well as the word used for mouth. The kind of justice and standing for rights of the poor demanded of the king is that which is accomplished only when one has and speaks the wisdom of God. The woman “opens her mouth” with just such wisdom that comes only from Yahweh. A requirement for a king was righteous lips. The righteous lips of the king open with wisdom in order to defend those in need.

Deuteronomy 17:14-20

Proverbs 16:10-15

It is interesting to note that a king is to learn to “fear Yahweh”, which is listed in Proverbs 31:10-31 as the main attribute for which the woman is praised and out of which all her other attributes flow. Also, not that justice is a main concern of a king, as well as that his lips are “righteous”

In the end, all kings rule properly only by wisdom: **Proverbs 8:12-16**.

The format and theme of those final two verses of the first poem (vv. 8-9), are also similar to the format and thematic content of the two-verse *fulcrum* in the second poem (vv. 19-20). Verses 8 and 9 contain the same imperative phrase “Open your mouth” followed by a description of why, for whom, or for what the king should open his mouth. **Proverbs 31:8-9**.

The view is that the king should open his mouth for the sake of the poor and disadvantaged. In v. 19-20 a similar parallel structure is used with regards to the woman's hands: **Proverbs 31:19-20**

The same Hebrew words are used in both of these verses to mean alternately hand and palm (all translated by the ESV as "hand" or "hands"). There is a parallel structure here as in verses 8-9, and thematically the two couplets are similar. The mouth of the king and the hands of the woman are in service to those who are served by them in their vocations. The king speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves and defends and upholds the rights of those who do not have means of their own. The woman works with her willing hands for her family, who benefit by her busy physical labor, spiritual teaching, and economic activity, and on behalf of the poor and needy. In so doing, the woman is fulfilling her vocations of wife, mother, household manager, and member of the community.

The vocabulary in these instances reveals thematic similarities as well. An obvious one is care of the needy and those who are less fortunate. This theme is stressed more clearly in verses 1-9, but it also comes up in the poem concerning the woman of strong character. The king is to care for those who are afflicted, dying, "in bitter distress", "mute", "destitute", "poor", and "needy". He is advised and commanded to do so by using wine and strong drink in specific ways, as well as by opening his mouth in his position as one who judges in order to advocate on their behalf. In his role as king and judge, the king reflects the work of Yahweh, who rules and governs all things for the good of His people, and who judges righteously. The woman serves the "poor" and "needy" through her vocations. She is praised for actively doing so. The language used to describe the woman's activity echoes language used of Yahweh as He cares for and preserves His people.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 2: How are the two poems similar verbally and thematically? Do you think this was intentional and do you think there was one author?

Coming Full Circle

Strikingly, together the two poems echo the contrast set up in the early chapters of Proverbs (chs. 1-9) between the way of Wisdom and way of Dame Folly/the adulterous woman and the contrast between blessing and detriment. In those chapters, a father is speaking, teaching his son the ways. Similarly, in **31:1-9**, the mother of King Lemuel is speaking to her son, teaching him wisdom and warning him against those unworthy women who would steal his strength. In fact, her words are extremely reminiscent of some of the early verses of Proverbs, **Proverbs 1:8-10**. These opening lines are brought full circle in Prov. 31, where the mother's teaching is recited, and where that teaching closely echoes the opening warning from the father not to be enticed by sinners. He goes on immediately to describe wicked people who would entice the son to lay in wait for blood, who would steal, and more. The mother warns against women who steal his strength.

The mother's specific warning about women, however, echoes much of the rest of chs. 1-9. **Proverbs 2:16-19**: Women of this nature steal the strength of the godly by drawing them away from Yahweh, in who their strength lies (she "forgets the covenant of her God"), and eventually leading to their death ("her house sinks down to death"). The theme of avoiding the evil woman and the consequences of her actions is echoed throughout those early chapters

with a strong emphasis. Another passage strikingly similar to the mother's advice is again in the advice of the father to his sons: **Proverbs 5:7-14**.

The mother goes on to offer a glimpse of the detriment that will come from following the ways of the adulterous woman, which in addition to losing his strength would include, it seems, drinking in such a way as to no longer properly carry out his vocation as king.

The woman of strong character, on the other hand, echoes the portraits of Lady Wisdom in the early chapters (as we will explore more in depth in the next chapter of this study), as well as the blessings derived from following the way of Yahweh. She is a living and active embodiment, in a sense, of the advice of the father in the early chapters, and the opposite of the woman warned against by the mother in the first nine verses of chapter 31. Like Wisdom, the woman is "more precious than jewels". Like those who have wisdom, she prospers, and her family prospers because of her. As advised by the fathers in the early chapters, the woman follows the ways of Wisdom and fears Yahweh. Wisdom herself, when speaking in Proverbs 8, makes clear that those who follow her will be blessed: **Proverbs 8:32-36**.

These verses sum up the main theme of Proverbs, as we discussed in the first chapter of our study. The contrast between the way of Wisdom/way of Yahweh and how it leads to blessing, and the way of Dame Folly/the adulterous woman and how it leads to death governs all of what the Proverbs teach. By combining these two poems, which may or may not be by the same author, and placing them at the end of the Book of Proverbs, the final editor brings the book full circle. In so doing, he reminds us and drives home for us that this book is not about mere pithy or practical sayings, but rather about the grace and mercy of Yahweh as revealed to us by HIS WISDOM.

Discussion Question 3: If you are a mother, what advice would you give your sons and daughters (grandchildren)? As a daughter, what advice or instruction did you most appreciate from your mother? Or what advice or instruction do you wish they had given you? If your parents were Christians, what did your parents contribute to your walking in the ways of the wisdom of Yahweh? Or, how did other “spiritual fathers and mothers” contribute to your learning to walk in the ways of the wisdom of Yahweh?

Discussion Question 4: How do the two poems reflect the early chapters of Proverbs, and how do they bring the book full circle?

Conclusion

Though at first glance these two poems seem as though they are strangely placed, as one explores their form and structure, the commonalities in words and themes, and the way in which they complete the entire Book of Proverbs, it becomes clear that these poems are more connected than they first seem. Both the mother offering her son advice and the woman of

Proverbs 31:10-31 are wise women. As Raymond Apple notes, “Where one woman preaches, the other practices”. In other words, the wise mother of the first nine verses instructs in what Horace Hummel calls “vocational wisdom”. Based on her knowledge of what is called for in a kind, as well as her wisdom from Yahweh, the mother instructs her son, the king, in the duties of his kingly office, as well as in general with regard to keeping himself from women who would “steal” his strength. Meanwhile, the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 embodies and lives out wisdom and the fear of Yahweh in her vocations as a wife, mother, household manager, and member of the community. In so doing, she mirrors much of what the mother instructs for her son: charity to the poor and opening her mouth with wisdom.

Together, the two poems bring the Book of Proverbs full circle. They focus on the two possible ways man might follow: the way of Wisdom or the path of the adulterous woman. Like in the early chapters of Proverbs, they display the contrast between the results of following one of those two paths. to follow the adulterous woman is to give away one’s strength, which is a gift from Yahweh’s hand, and to abandon one’s vocation, thereby harming the neighbor. Ultimately, the early chapters tell us, this abandonment of Yahweh’s wisdom and following after other temptations leads only to death. to have the “fear of the Lord” is to work vigorously in one’s vocation with the strength endowed by Yahweh as He works through you. It is to reach out a hand to the needy, “look well to the ways” of your household, proclaim Yahweh’s mercy, impart His wisdom to others, and prosper (ultimately in the sense of salvation and eternal life with Yahweh). This draws the reader’s attention again to the Wisdom of Yahweh, a gift from His hand, and ultimately, Wisdom Incarnate—Christ Jesus Himself. Lest the reader get caught up in thinking the Proverbs are a disjointed collection of sayings and lose their centeredness in Yahweh’s gifts and grace, the final two poems act as a bookend with the first nine chapters, reminding us to interpret all that comes between in the light of the Wisdom of God and the life it brings.