

Chapter 6

Demystifying the

Proverbs 31 Woman



Chapter 6

Proverbs 31:10-31 In the Context of Proverbs Chp 1-9

Opening Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, You are the way, the truth and the life. In this world, we face many temptations to follow after the things of the world and the ways that lead to death. Grant that we may heed Your invitation and walk in Your ways, for you live and reign with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever . Amen.

Key Term for This Chapter

Theme: Important idea or concept conveyed through word choice, style, and more. The theme is central to the text and helps to convey its meaning. For instance, we can see through the repetition of the word “good” in the creation narrative that the theme of that narrative is that God’s work in creation is “good”, indeed, “very good”. The main unifying theme of the Book of Proverbs is Wisdom, the fear of Yahweh and the contrast between the way of Yahweh and the way of the other gods.

Introduction

We saw in chapter 5 that the whole of Proverbs 31 brings the book to a close. And though chapters 1-9 and chapter 31 are separated by a lot of other material, they are actually closely connected thematically. Tom R. Hawkins asserts that specifically and especially, 31:10-31 is closely connected to the opening chapters of Proverbs and indeed the entire book. Specifically, all of the positive ways of viewing women are gathered together in this final portion of Proverbs.

The dichotomy of favorable and unfavorable female imagery is set up in those first 9 chapters. Solomon displays the difference between the way of Wisdom and the way of death by using Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly/the adulterous woman as pictures of what following those two ways means. These opening chapters, then, inform our understanding of the whole of the Book of

Proverbs. When read alongside chapters 1-9, 31:10-31 obviously forms an *inclusio* with those opening chapters. As mentioned before, an *inclusio* uses similar or even the same vocabulary and themes to tie together two parts of a reading. It can span a small or large portion of text. That the woman of 31:10-31 is closely tied to chapters 1-9 raises questions such as these: How is she related to these early chapters: What does this mean for how we understand her? How does she interface with Lady Wisdom? What, ultimately, does all of this tell us about Yahweh and Jesus?

By comparing the women of Proverbs 31:10-31 to the opening chapters and their depictions of wisdom, we will see how the woman shares many characteristics with wisdom.

Reread Proverbs 31:10-31 and read thru chapters 1-9.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 1: After reading chapters 1-9 what are some of the similarities that you notice with Proverbs 31:10-31? Are there any verses that especially strike you?

Overlapping Themes in Chapters 1-9 and the 31:10-31 Woman

As noted previously in this study, the first nine chapters of Proverbs are a father's advice to his son. This advice encompasses many areas of life, but they are all connected to, and ultimately concerned with, the son's learning to follow wisdom and fear Yahweh. This is often spoken of in terms of seeking the right kind of woman and avoiding the woman who leads astray. Like the first nine chapters, the whole of chapter 31 contains advice, only this time

from a mother to her son. The first nine verses directly reference the type of woman who steals a man's strength (*chayil*) and leads him astray, while the latter verses vividly portray the opposite kind of woman, the one who has strength (*chayil*) herself. From this overall similarity, we see that there are many details at the beginning and end of the Book of Proverbs that also overlap. This begins first with the fact that 31:10-31 opens with the question concerning finding a woman of strength (*chayil*). This, in a sense, has been the concern of the first nine chapters and actually the whole of the Book of Proverbs.

More precious than jewels/wisdom as wealth

Thomas P. McCreesh points out that the opening line of 31:10-31 is a rhetorical question expecting a negative answer—no one can find such a woman! He compares this with Job's question about Wisdom: **Job 28:12.** The rest of the poem then points out that it cannot be found anywhere except with God. However, our poem goes on to describe in great detail that very woman. So while it expects the response that she cannot be found. It also describes her, making the question place an emphasis on her incomparable value. Hence the following line, which says that her worth is beyond that of jewels. For this reason, she should be sought. This echoes the father's depiction of the worth of wisdom and the fact that it should be sought after as one would seek after silver in chapter 2: **Proverbs 2:1-5**

Chapter 3 emphasizes again the value of wisdom and personifies wisdom as a woman, making 31:10 even more of an echo of this early passage: **Proverbs 3:13-15**

By chapter 8, wisdom herself speaks and addresses all. Of herself, she cries out: **Proverbs 8:10-11**

Both wisdom and the woman of 31:10-31 are more precious than jewels. Their worth is, in other words, beyond comparison. To place the woman of

31:10-31 alongside wisdom and describe her worth in this way is to imply that there is certainly more to the woman than a mere mortal with a laundry list of exceptional activities. She is indeed rare and precious, beyond compare, and impossible to find. This points us again to the fact that her true identity is , as Mc Creesh says, a riddle to be solved.

**More Proverbs That Describe
Wisdom as More Precious Than Jewels/Gold/Silver:**

Proverbs 16:16 & Proverbs 8:19

Wealth/gain/riches/long life

Throughout the poem about the woman, it is clear that her activity, knowledge, and understanding lead to the idea of wealth (captured in a meaning of *chayil*), gain for the household, riches and honor, and long life. These are also gifts bestowed by wisdom.

One of the meanings of *chayil* can be “wealth”. It is clear from the description of the woman that she indeed brings wealth to her household through her activity. Wisdom describes herself as being the one who possesses wealth, riches, and honor: **Proverbs 8:18-21**

Wisdom gifts an inheritance to “those who love” her. She gifts those who follow her ways with all good things. Proverbs 24 expands on this notion by asserting this: **Proverbs 24:3-4**. Note that this is not, ultimately, material wealth. Of course, often acting wisely and working diligently do lead to wealth, or at least comfort, so wisdom, in a general sense, may add to material comfort in this life. However, the true riches with which Wisdom is concerned are those that last into eternity, in other words, those riches that come from justice and righteousness. The riches given ultimately by wisdom are eternal life, forgiveness, and salvation.

Other passages point to how Wisdom possesses and gives “long life”. **Proverbs 3:16**. This idea is echoed in **Proverbs 31:12**. As discussed in chapter 2 of this study, Steinmann notices a nod to eternity in this verse. He compares it to the thieves described in chapter 1, who fill the house with plundered good, and whose way leads to death, both now and forever. Wisdom has long life—eternal life—and she gifts that to those who follow her ways.

The woman of Proverbs 31:10-31, then, reflects Wisdom in that she adds to the wealth and riches of her household, and especially her husband. Her continual activity on behalf of her family and servants leads to their continued gain in the riches of the gifts of eternal life and salvation.

Trust in Her; Receive honor

The idea of honor was mentioned in conjunction with the riches in many of the verses from the previous section. This honor comes to those who trust in Wisdom, and to the husband, who trusts in his wife. Those who place their trust in Wisdom/the wife of strong character are given the gains of wealth, knowledge, understanding, and eternal life, which lead to them being honored.

Proverbs 31:11, Proverbs 4:6-9

Proverbs 4 is the advice given by Wisdom to her student. Precisely as Wisdom teaches the student to do with regard to his wife of strong character in chapter 31. The idea of guarding someone again brings to mind a physical strength or militaristic image, much as many of the references in chapter 31 reflect that this is precisely what the woman does. Even the word for “gain” in verse 11 is, as you may remember, the same as the word for spoils taken in war. Wisdom guards fiercely those entrusted to her, just as the woman seems to guard and fight for her family through her careful provision and diligent work in Proverbs 31:10-31.

Also, the trust placed in Wisdom leads her to lift one to a position of honor. Similarly, the woman's husband gains honor through her. The husband, who trusts in his wife, is said to be "known in the gates where he sits among the elders of the land", a position of honor and respect (Proverbs 31:23). In fact, Wisdom is the one who speaks from the city gates and therefore can lift others to a place of honor there: **Proverbs 1:21.**

Teaching/imparting knowledge and understanding

Throughout chapters 1-9, both the father giving advice and Wisdom herself, when personified, encouraged the young man to take heed of Wisdom's teachings or describe those teachings. In fact, the goal of the Book of Proverbs, as stated by Solomon in chapter 1:1-4 for the one being taught to know wisdom and instruction, knowledge, and understanding. The father urges the son he is instructing: **Proverbs 1:8.** The father again exhorts his son to listen to his words, and therefore make his ear attentive to wisdom in the opening lines of chapter 2. The father's words impart understanding and insight. Chapter 3 has a similar exhortation: **Proverbs 3:1.** In fact, chapters 4 and 7 also open with a similar injunction to listen to the father's words and for the son to incline himself to understanding, knowledge, and wisdom.

Similarly, the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is said to open "her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue: (v. 26). You will recall from chapter 3 of this study that the word for kindness here is the Hebrew word *chesed*, which means faithfulness/loving kindness/mercy. The woman speaks and teaches the ultimate content of wisdom, that is, the grace and mercy of Yahweh to His people. When she opens her mouth, she instructs her children and servants in the ways of the Lord. Learning, understanding, and walking in ways of Yahweh are the goals of the instruction of the father in the early chapters and the teaching of Wisdom as personified, especially in chapter 8. Wisdom herself says: **Proverbs 8:8-13.**

The content of the instruction throughout Proverbs is the fear of Yahweh, which is wisdom. To fear Yahweh, to trust in Him and His mercy and therefore walk in His ways, is the height of what is to be taught. The woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 fears Yahweh and possesses the wisdom that comes from Him: knowledge and understanding of His forgiveness, grace, and mercy. This is what she opens her mouth to teach those who are of her household, just as Wisdom calls to all those passing by and invites them to partake of this same instruction.

All of this instruction, understanding, knowledge, and wisdom ultimately comes from Yahweh: **Proverbs 2:6-7.** In opening her mouth to speak the things of Yahweh, the woman is closely tied to Wisdom personified and to Yahweh and His activity.

Laugh at the Future

A recurring theme in the first nine chapters, as well as in verses 10-13, is that of security, well-being, and life dwelling with Wisdom. The security that wisdom and the woman both have (and impart to others) is such that they can laugh “at the time to come” (31:25). The woman’s security and her preparedness for the future are shown through the fact that she need not fear snow for her household because she has prepared the proper clothing for them to withstand the winter (v. 21). It is also apparent in the fact that her household is well fed and well-provisioned in all possible manners. Her security and certainty, however, do not come from material preparation alone. Rather, these things picture for us the true security of those who fear the Lord above all things. Knowing that the Lord provides for all things, the woman can laugh at the time to come, secure in Yahweh’s loving care—His *chesed*. Likewise, Wisdom personified can also laugh at calamity and at the doom that awaits those who do not heed her voice. In 1:26, she laughs at the ones who do not listen and promises: “I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you”. On the other hand, Wisdom promises those

who love her: “Whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster (1:33).

In Proverbs 31:10-31, the family and all household members of the wife benefit from her instruction and teaching, as well as from her gracious activity on their behalf. The woman’s husband and all her household can also dwell secure and laugh at the time to come, for they have listened to the wisdom she teaches.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 2: What are some of the woman’s attributes that are similar to Lady Wisdom’s as portrayed in the first nine chapters?

Wisdom and the Wife vs. the Foreign/Adulteress Woman

Another strong component in the first nine chapters is the contrast between Lady Wisdom and the adulteress woman (Dame Folly). In that regard, read an interesting excerpt from chapter 7, which is counterbalanced by verse 22 in chapter 31: **Proverbs 31:22.**

Steinmann saw in 31:22 a reference to the marriage bed. By making the bed coverings, the woman shows an interest in and dedication to maintaining her marriage and the physical intimacy so important to it. Her work in this way counteracts the charms of the foreign or adulteress woman, who is her opposite in every way. The foreign or adulteress woman dresses her couches to entice men into adultery and dissipation. Though married, she wanders from home, committing adultery. Her errands in the market are to seek out someone to entice, rather than to care for her family and household. The wife in 31:10-31 is her opposite in every way. She is completely immersed in the matters that are important for her household and faithful to her husband. As

a wife, she promotes the marriage bed without ostentation, but merely by once again caring for it and providing all that is needed.

Just as Wisdom as personified in chapters 1-9 is the direct opposite of the foreign or adulteress woman, so too, does the wife of chapter 31 stand in opposition to her. She is the kind of woman, rather, whose care and attention, words and ways, lead to the strengthening of the family and life. The way of wisdom, too, leads to life and salvation, while the way of the adulteress serves only to bring those who are enticed by her to their utter destruction and death. **Proverbs 5:18-20**

DISCUSSION QUESTION 3: At the beginning of the chapter, you noted similarities you saw in our own reading of chapters 1-9 of Proverbs. What are some that we didn't cover here that you think are also helpful to making connections between the parts of the book?

Excursus(detour): The Metaphor of Adultery and Faithfulness for Yahweh and His People in Scripture

Initially, the references here in Proverbs to the idea of faithfulness to your wife, rejoicing in her, and the pitfalls of adultery with the foreign woman seem like a strange set of ideas for Holy Scripture. This is, however, a common theme throughout the Old Testament especially. Yahweh uses the metaphor of faithfulness in marriage and adultery to describe His relationship with His people, Israel. He describes Israel as His Bride and describes her faithlessness to Him. Here are some representative passages:

Isaiah 62:1-5,

Jeremiah 2:2,

Jeremiah 2:23,
Ezekiel 16:8-12; 15-22
Ezekiel 23:37

There are numerous other examples of this theme as played out through the Old Testament. In fact, the entire Book of Hosea is an unraveling of this metaphor as shown through Hosea's life, which becomes an object lesson for Yahweh and Israel. **Hosea 1:2.** Hosea marries Gomer, and together they bear several children who are named for Israel's situation (No Mercy, Not My People, etc.) Then, just as Israel is unfaithful to Yahweh through her worship of foreign gods and breaking of His Law, so is Gomer unfaithful to Hosea. She returns to her life of prostitution. Hosea continually shows her mercy, just as Yahweh shows the people of Israel mercy. **Hosea 3:3,5.**

Yahweh, the Bridegroom, rescues Israel, His Bride, from her misery and sins. He marries her—makes a covenant with her—and adorns her with His gifts of life and salvation, pictured in the adornment that would be given to a bride (jewels, rings, bracelets, headdresses). Israel, however, is faithless and commits adultery by going after other gods.

In a similar picture, Proverbs uses the language of marriage, faithfulness, faithlessness, and adultery to depict the two separate ways: the way of Wisdom and the way of the adulterous woman, which stand in for the way of Yahweh and the way of other gods. The son addressed throughout Proverbs is encouraged to pursue as a bride Wisdom, personified as a woman because the Hebrew word has a feminine ending. Likewise, he is warned against following after the adulterous woman, who would lead him into evil and death. So while Proverbs picks up and uses much of the same imagery as many other Old Testament passages, it uses it in a specific, slightly altered way as it seeks to instruct the young man to pursue the things of God.

Conclusion

From this general comparison with the first nine chapters of Proverbs, we can see how Proverbs 31:10-31 connects quite closely to the imagery used in those chapters to portray Wisdom and the ways of Yahweh. Additionally, the description of the woman holds many reminders of the contrast between Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly. The woman is similar to Lady Wisdom. She instructs in wisdom and knowledge, bestows honor and is herself honored, is more precious than jewels, laughs at the time to come, gifts those who love her with wealth (not just material but also spiritual) and is sought after. Again, as Hawkins asserted all the “favorable imagery” surrounding women reaches a climax in these final verses of the Book of Proverbs. Everything the young man has been taught to seek for diligently, and which has been listed as an attribute or characteristic of the perfect woman/wisdom, finds its culmination in the picture of this wife and mother building up her household through strength of character and diligent work, all on account of her fear of the Lord. Given the many similarities to how Wisdom is described in the first nine chapters, the woman seems to be at least closely related to Wisdom, if not herself, a further portrait of that Wisdom. In the next chapter, we’ll take a closer look at the relationship between Proverbs 31:10-31 and the most important chapter on Wisdom, Proverbs 8, to see if you can learn a bit more about how to understand the Proverbs woman. We’ll also see how the imagery used of her builds on and completes the portrait of Wisdom, which we’ve seen is given in the first nine chapters of Proverbs.

Discussion Question 4: When thinking of the riddle of the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31, how do you understand her? Do you think other interpretations are possible? What might some other ideas be?
