

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 20, The Capable Woman Proverbs 31

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This is Dr. Knute Heim in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 20, the capable slash powerful woman. Proverbs chapter 31, verses 10 through 31.

Welcome to lecture 20, the final lecture in our series on the biblical book of Proverbs. We are now looking at verses 10 to 31 in chapter 31 of the book and we will explore these verses. There's a beautiful poem about an almost superhuman wife, a woman, in the context of whether and how it is connected to verses 1 to 9, which we covered in the previous lecture, which was the teaching of King Lemuel's mother, which was talking about steering him away from the wrong kinds of women and whether or not and how perhaps this poem about this superwoman may actually be related to the opening sequence in the chapter.

Another thing we will at least briefly cover is the question of why would there be such an amazing poem about a wise and valiant, powerful, capable superwoman at the end of this collection of collections in the book of Proverbs. So, first of all, the poem itself, verses 10 to 31, is actually expressed in a quite unusual way in the original Hebrew language because the 22 verses in this poem all begin with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. So verse 10 begins with Aleph, the first letter of the alphabet, verse 11 with Bet, the second letter of the alphabet, and so on, until in verse 31 we reach the Taf, at the beginning of the verse, the final letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

So, we have, if you like, the A to Z of a capable wife or some kind of super wife, and we're going to look at in what way she is super in a moment. What this means then is that this poem, this praise of this astonishing woman, is a self-contained poetic unit. It is a poem in its own right.

And therefore, most people who read this really read it in isolation from the opening nine verses of the chapter. And there's nothing wrong with that. It can be done and certainly it does stand.

It is a self-contained poem. However, remember we asked the question, why is it there at the end of Proverbs? Remember also we have seen all sorts of editorial, and macro-editorial practices of how the different collections were put together, in what sequence, and how they interact with one another. So, it may just be possible that there is more than meets the eye here as well.

And there were two scholars who have suggested that there may be a link between verses 1 to 9 on the one hand and verses 10 to 31 on the other. One scholar in

particular, I think it was Lichtheim, argued or made the suggestion that if the Queen Mother was warning her son of the wrong kinds of women in verses 1 to 9, it seems to be at the very least a happy circumstance that we now read of a rather suitable kind of woman in this final poem. My own PhD student, the Reverend Dr. Jeanette Hartwell, has written on women in the Book of Proverbs.

And in her PhD, she raises a fascinating question, something that to my knowledge no one else has contemplated before. And she is asking the question, is it possible that there is an even closer link between the poem and the lecture? And she is suggesting, of course, it cannot be proved, but I think again an imaginative reading may well suggest this. Is it possible that the opening question, a capable wife, who can find, which many people believe to be a rhetorical question that implies the answer, no one, she cannot be found, but then why do the rest of the poem go on about this amazing woman, which obviously some husband has found, because he is encouraged to praise her and to give her, to respect and honor her publicly.

So, Dr. Hartwell is suggesting that it is just possible that the question, a capable wife, who can find, maybe the petulant response of King Lemuel to his mother's chiding, to which she then responds by describing the kind of capable woman she is thinking of. And if that were the case, she would then be ending her lecture, now in poetic form, to her son by saying, you should give her the respect that she deserves. A fascinating proposal, which I think is really worth considering.

I have for many years considered that the two are connected, because they obviously have to do with women and about valuing women. And so I would really tend to follow this suggestion as a very interesting, imaginative reading that makes sense of the whole and adds an entirely new sense and dimension to the whole thing. Having said this then, I will now proceed and explain some of the details in the text.

Most of what I now say is not dependent on whether or not verses 10 to 31 are connected in the way we've suggested here, because the poem can of course, and does work very well, standing on its own. First of all, I want to say something about the phrase, a capable wife who can find, or as the NIV translation says, a wife of noble character who can find. Or other translations have a valiant woman, and so on.

It's really quite important actually to realize that the phrase used here, Eshet Hayil in Hebrew, is a very rare combination that, to my knowledge, only appears I think three times in the whole of the Bible, and the third time I've just forgotten. But the other time where it appears, the title, this clearly a title of honor, is assigned to a particular woman, namely to Ruth in the Book of Ruth. And isn't it interesting also that Ruth, perhaps like this woman here, is a non-Israelite.

She is a foreigner. And why is Ruth called an Eshet Hayil? Because Ruth is someone who has enabled her mother-in-law to flourish. By leaving her home, looking after

her, and then eventually providing for her financially through her work, and then through her marriage, to actually get a grandchild for Naomi.

So, this is of course part of the patriarchal expectations of what a good wife, a good woman, should be doing. But nonetheless, Ruth is considered one of the great heroines, not only in the Bible itself but in Israelite tradition through the ages. She truly is an ideal kind of not only wife, but also daughter, and I would say an ideal and amazing wife in her own right.

So, the fact that this woman here is called an Eshet Hayil, only one other woman in the Bible being called one, is truly significant. This is really an honorific title of the highest degree. The second thing that's perhaps worth saying is that the male equivalent of an Eshet Hayil would be a Gibor Hayil.

And a Gibor Chayil is a warrior, a powerful warrior that defeats enemies. So, we almost have martial terminology applied to this powerful woman here, which is why I actually prefer a translation like, a powerful woman who can find. And then in answer to the question, the rest of the poem does not actually answer the question.

The question is, who can find one? We are not told. What we are told is what a capable or powerful woman is like. If the idea of this is still interchanged between the queen mother and her son, the implication might be that the mother is telling her son, look, you don't need to find one, you've got one, and this is what she's like.

And you better respect and honor her and treat her like she deserves. Anyway, moving on, what we then get is an astonishing description of this amazing woman. It begins, however, in verse 11 with her importance for her husband.

So, the heart of her husband trusts in her and he will have no lack of gain. So this is about marital and other kinds of faithfulness and financial benefit on the one hand. And then at the end of the chapter, and the book, it says, verse 31, give her a share in the fruit of her hands and let her works praise her in the city gate.

So, this is about not only really truly giving the woman what she deserves and respecting, honoring, and praising her publicly. So it shifts away from what she can do for the man to what the man should do for her within the patriarchal context of what we're dealing with. We then have a long description of the kinds of things that she does.

She does him good and not harm all the days of her life. It's still to do with the man. And this reminds us, I hope, of chapter 11, verse 22.

A beautiful woman without discretion who will harm her man. This one does not. We're not told whether or not she is beautiful or not, interestingly.

Although we are told at the end, near the end in verse 30, charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. This could imply that she's not particularly attractive, but it does not have to imply that. Similarly to Proverbs 11, 22, where we've explored the fact that the woman is beautiful, but her discretion makes this invaluable.

It doesn't mean that beauty in either women or men is something to be snuffed at or that is being denigrated by the wisdom texts here. But rather what is being said is that what truly counts long term in a relationship is inner beauty. And outer beauty is an added benefit, not a distraction.

Coming back now to verse 13 onwards. From 13 onwards we see that the woman is being described as an entrepreneur and a very successful one at that. Mainly to do with haute couture and cloth making, but clearly on an industrial scale.

Because although she herself works, she has employees who work for her. I give you a flavor of this. She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands.

She is like the ships of the merchants. She brings her food from afar. So this is about international trade here.

She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant girls. That's the employees. She considers the field and buys it.

So, she is into property management, into real estate. She considers with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with rags.

So, she is into agriculture and wine production. Fascinating stuff. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.

Her lamb does not go out. At night she puts her hand to the staff. So she is clearly very diligent and hardworking.

Then in verse 21 she opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy. Again, we have here an ideal person being portrayed as someone who is concerned, actively concerned with regard to social justice, with regard to caring for those who are vulnerable to society, and who cannot care for themselves. I should perhaps say, even as I've said just now, social justice, I think there is a distinction, both modern and ancient, between care for the vulnerable in society and active advocacy for social justice.

The two are related but they are not necessarily the same. So, the king, King Lemuel, is called to be involved in advocacy for social justice, which is actual active opposition

to the perpetrators of social injustice. The example we have here of the woman is she is concerned for the welfare of the vulnerable in society.

We are not told specifically that she is involved in social justice advocacy. That doesn't mean that she is not doing it but it is not highlighted. Moving on, verses 22 and following, she is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson.

Again, I think while clearly, she is involved with cloth making and so on, this is used as a metaphor for a holistic provision for her family itself but also for the wider extended household. She is someone who provides work for others and social security for the wider community and her own family. Verse 23, following, her husband is known in the city gates, he is taking his seat among the elders of the land.

This again in the middle of the poem highlights at the beginning and the end the benefit that she brings to her husband. And one of the key benefits here is that the husband rises in social standing through her achievements. Again it is male oriented, it is patriarchal but nonetheless remarkable just in the breadth and depth of this woman's achievements.

The text then goes on to describe further activities to do with cloth making and so on. Verse 25 says strength and dignity are her clothing and she laughs at the time to come. I think this is an important phrase for our understanding of what is going on here because the phrase laughs at the time to come clearly shows her self-confidence and independence, very significant.

It also shows her self-sufficiency independent of her husband and other patriarchal structures. And then the first half of the verse, strength and dignity are her clothing. Well, this of course is metaphorical.

It highlights the fact that the very way she carries herself, the way she dresses, power dressing, but also the way she comes across not only to others but the way she feels about herself is she is a woman that has inner strength and confidence and she is a woman of dignity. And dignity I believe has a twofold connotation. That both has to do with an inner sense of self-worth and a kind of demeanor and attitude and behavior that comes across as reassuring, and self-assured, but also as generous and as noble in the best sense of the social perspective of that word.

But then also dignity has to do with the way in which other people treat her and respect her as someone who is superior and well-established in the wider community. In verse 26 we are told that she is not only a hard worker but she is also a good teacher. Verse 26, she opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

So, she is a wise teacher which is now the second example of a wise woman teaching other people just here in this final chapter. And I don't have time to make the case for this but Jeanette Hartwell in her work has clearly shown that there are many more voices of women in the Book of Proverbs and much more teaching. So that for example when we have the father urging his son in the opening nine chapters of the book to listen to his teaching, sometimes there is a parallel, do not forget your father's teaching nor your mother's teaching.

And even where the mother is not mentioned explicitly, she may be implicitly there in all of the lectures. So, women are considered regular teachers in the Book of Proverbs of wisdom. Specifically and especially in the household but that is true largely also for the teaching of the father in Proverbs 1-9 as well.

She, however, it seems to be this one here, this woman, speaks publicly. And part of her wisdom, by the way also it is important, the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. This is not just a kind of idyllic side remark but part of the makeup of this woman is that the kinds of things that she teaches is kindness.

And this now potentially brings us to the point where not only is she involved in helping the vulnerable but this may very well be a short summary of her being involved in teaching advocacy for social justice. In verse 20, her children rise up and call her happy. Her husband too and he praises her.

So, this is a description of a matter of fact. If one is lucky enough to have such a woman as one's mother or as one's wife, it seems a natural thing to do. But having said that, through the centuries of course, this poem has been used to describe an ideal wife, typically a wife that does all her work at home in the kitchen and sewing and knitting and all that sort of stuff.

It is easy to see why people naively took the poem in this way because there is a lot of cloth-making and so on in this chapter. But as I have tried to explain this, this is on an industrial scale and I think it was an unimaginative, very simplistic reading to think that this is just about a good housewife. The woman that is being described here is a woman of royal status.

She is a queen. And any husband who would want to deserve her, and to be honest any husband who would not probably have to feel dwarfed by her, better shape up. This queen among other things deserves the king of a man for her husband.

So, any man who would aspire to have a woman like that, better shape up. One final comment. So, her husband and the children praise her and then we have in verse 29 a direct quotation of what the putative husband is saying.

And he says this, Many women have done excellently, but you have surpassed them all. There is a very interesting comparison here between different kinds of women. And there are two ways of reading this.

One way of reading this is, that the husband is playing this woman off against other women and ultimately of course what happens in the poem is any woman who doesn't live up to this kind of standard is made to feel bad. That's one way of reading the poem and this has been done a lot through the centuries. I've talked to students of mine, female students, who have told me as much.

I've talked to people in congregations, women who have told me this. Having said that, I think it is worth saying that even the women who have not quite done as well as this one, the text actually says, many women have done excellently. So she's not compared as being better than all these failures.

She is described as being better than many excellent women. And not everybody, not every woman can be like this woman. To be honest, not every man can be like this woman.

Most men and most women cannot. She is idealized perhaps, exaggerated. But nonetheless, I think, and this is really important, I think, as we draw to a close in all of this, she is idealized not in order to make us, whether men or women, feel bad about ourselves, but rather in order to inspire us.

And I think this is a portrayal of a woman that is, while ideal, also to a degree realistic. There are women in history, from every walk of life, in every culture, that have lived up to something like this. Many of them are known by name in their communities, generations after they have lived.

This brings me to a final hermeneutical consideration, namely, there is a lively discussion that will probably last forever, as to how idealized this wife is. Is she really a real woman? Or is she perhaps even a personification of wisdom herself, as in Proverbs 9 and 8? And the argument on this goes backward and forwards, and again I would say when we have a highly evocative, imaginative, poetic text like this, and for centuries people have argued either way, it probably means that it's both, rather than one or the other. This is both a portrayal of wisdom and a final appeal to embrace wisdom as our spouse, talking to men in particular, if we were to talk to female readers or listeners, I guess it would be to embrace her as an older sister, as a mother, as a colleague, as a collaborator.

Or, if you want to go there, to personify wisdom as a man. That would be another one. But ultimately, I think we also really want to stay with the fact that we have here a portrayal of a real woman as well.

Really to inspire modern men and modern women today, no matter from which culture you come from, with, as the text says, verse 30, with the fear of the Lord, true wisdom, hard work, and concern for other people, you can achieve more than you ever dreamt of. You can achieve more than whatever your family members, your local community, and your culture, want to impose on you. This is a chapter of true inspiration, not to make us feel guilty, but to help us aspire to true wisdom, by the grace and mercy of God, asking, with the beginning of the book, for God's wisdom, seeking the fear of God as both the beginning, the means and the consequence of our search for wisdom.

And with this, we come to our close in this series of lectures on the biblical book of Proverbs. God bless you.

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