

The Way of Skillful Living Described:  
The Proverbs

It is very interesting that the book begins with the instruction of a father (1:8-9:18) to a son, it concludes with the instruction of a mother for her son (31:1-9). It begins with the wisdom of wise men, but it ends with the extolling of the wisdom of a wise woman (31:10-31), a lady that is a model of wisdom, grit, and valor.

We know nothing of the identity of Lemuel, or his mother, except what we can glean from the content of the chapter (concerns, character, teaching). We know of no Jewish king with that name. Because some have suggested that Lemuel is a pseudonym for Solomon, the unidentified lady is surmised to be Bathsheba; the assertion has not evidential warrant. Solomon identifies himself in his writing and it would seem strange that he would assume a pseudonym in the final two chapters.

I. The Instruction of a Wise Mother rehearsed by a Wise Son, vv. 1-9

A. Introduction, v. 1

We learn several things here: first, the verse that follow is tense and active mood. The subsequent verses are a summary of his mother's teachings ("oracle" means message). Second, he must have had a very caring, experienced, wise mother. Third, Lemuel must have listened to her!

B. The passion of a mother for her son, v. 2

One has written, "What an animating burst from the yearning of a mother's heart!" An illustration can be found in the story of Hannah (I Sam. 1) or the story of Augustine's mother, St. Monica.

C. A mother's personal instruction remembered, vv. 3-9

1. Avoidance of forbidden gratification is wisdom, vv. 3-7

a) Sexual addictions, v. 3

Solomon forgot the lesson he taught his son (chapters, 2, 5, 7). Xerxes seemingly never was taught about it (Esther 1:1-2:1). See also, Exod. 6:32.

2. Alcoholism, vv. 4-5

Again, remember Belshazzar (Dan. 5), Xerxes' orgy. Moral excess blinds the eyes and the soul!!

3. A qualification, pleasures with responsibility, vv. 6-7

Pleasures without excess is a good thing. Wine-consumption within limits is a gift from God. It dulls pain (this was a world without anesthetics), calms the nerves, and grants rest! The verse may be saying that though others may have used drink as an escape, the king was not to do so.

D. A Mother's concern for others described, vv. 8-9

Not only did this mother care for the instruction of her son's welfare, but she wanted him to care for others and not exploit his position and privileges for self-indulgence.

1. To help the helpless, v. 8

“Dumb” or “mute” refers to those who cannot get a fair hearing because of a debilitation.

2. To defend the rights of the needy, v. 9

## II. The Exaltation of a Wise Mother Described: the portrait of a wise wife for her son, vv. 10-31

The form of the concluding poem is an alphabetic acrostic. Each of its twenty-two couplets begins with a word whose first letter is a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

One writer has aptly stated, “No treasure can be compared to the woman described in these verses.” Furthermore, the poem’s opening and closing lines are quite explicit about its subject matter and purpose: a wife, such as the one being described, is worth far more than rubies (31:10b) and is worthy of praise (31:31b). Who can find such a wife? (31:10a).

Some Introductory reflections:

If I were a wife reading this passage, I would walk away depressed with a frown on my face and a heavy heart. The portrait is impossible to emulate (the vast majority of caring wives across the centuries were not into real estate [v. 16], wives in our day do not make fabric from wool or cotton [v. 19], nor the help of household servants [v.15]). So, what can we say?

1. The portrait is that of the ideal, perfect wife, not a real one, at least a wife for Lemuel who was royalty.
2. The purpose of the portrait is to make the point that a wise wife cares for her family and is devoted to its welfare.
3. The portrait should not suggest that this lady, this quest for a hopeful mate for her son, consistently and perfectly meet all the criteria.
4. The portrait of the ideal wife is painted according to the ways of ancient times. The list is not to be emulated; it is composed of general principles with universal application.
5. This is an upper-class wife, wealthy. She has servants in her home (v. 15) and her husband is an elder statesman (v. 23).
6. Though Luther’s wife, Katie von Bora was opinionated and headstrong, he saw her otherwise. ““The greatest gift of God is a pious amiable spouse who fears God and loves his house, and with whom one can live in perfect confidence.”
7. The emphasis in the poem falls on the way she enhances the life and well-being of her husband during their entire life together. She is “a helper suitable for him” (Gen 2:18b).

One writer summarized the “idealization” this way: “The portrait of a woman is imaginary. The picture of her and her activities is idealistic, although not a fantasy. It is the portrait of a beloved wife as seen through the eyes of a grateful and admiring husband. There is nothing quite like it anywhere else in the Bible.”

- A. The general characteristics of a praiseworthy wife, vv. 10-12
  - 1. Her valuelessness, v. 10
 

Sometimes the Hebrew word is translated as “excellent” or “virtuous,” though a more accurate rendering would be “a fine wife, who can find?”
  - 2. Her trustworthiness, v. 11
  - 3. Her sacrifice, v. 12
- B. The general activities of a praiseworthy wife, vv. 13-27
 

What we find in verses 13-31 are again the words of Lemuel (v. 1). Verses. 2-9 are what his mother taught him and verses 3-31 are what he learned for himself.

It is interesting that the verbs that describe a godly wife are present in tense and active in mood,. The chief characteristic of her is that of industry; she is not involved in self-indulgent inactivity!

- 1. Provides clothing for her family, vv. 13, 19, 21
 

While the work of the wife may at times not be delightful, she focuses on the goal of helping and finds joy in it (v. 13).  
In verse 21, my English text reads that she clothes her family in scarlet (actually, the noun is plural, a very rare occurrence). However, there is better support to read the word as “double, suggesting of abundance.
- 2. Ensures that her family is well-fed, v. 14
- 3. She manages the home well, v. 15, v. 27
- 4. She is entrepreneurial, supplementing her family’s income, v. 16, v. 24
- 5. She is physically capable for the tasks set before her, v. 17
- 6. She works long days, v. 18
- 7. She cares for others, v. 19
- 8. She cares for her personal appearance, v. 22
- 9. Her husband is known and respected because of her, v. 23
- 10. She has inner qualities of godliness, v. 25
- 11. She employs her tongue to engender care and respect, v. 26
- 12. A summary, v. 27
- C. The fruit of an ideal wife’s sacrifice, vv. 28-31
 

The subservience of her personal interests to others brings to her praise.

  - 1. The praise of her family, vv. 28-29
  - 2. The foundation of her praise, v. 30
 

The reason or foundation of her activities is found in this verse. Not to denigrate personality or physical attractiveness, there is, however, a more enduring and durative quality. It is a reverential awe of God (1:7). Such is her true beauty, the reason for her care for her family and others.
  - 3. That her worthiness be recognized, v. 31
 

Praise at the “gate” would suggest that of her husband who is said to be an authority, by sitting at the gate (v. 23). Her husband praises her accomplishments before others.