

**Text: Pr 31.1-31**

One of the things I discovered in my study of Proverbs is that there is controversy over the authorship of Proverbs. Even though Solomon is identified three times as the author of most of the book, many writers question his role. Some of these are evangelicals who will give lip service to the doctrine of inerrancy. Apparently, to them, the Bible is inerrant except where it names the author of Proverbs.

However, that is not the focus of our subject this morning.

Today I'd like to direct your attention to the last section of Proverbs, attributed to King Lemuel. Some say Lemuel is another name for Solomon, but I think that Lemuel is someone else whose work Solomon discovered and incorporated into Proverbs as a fitting conclusion to his work. We'll see why I think so after a while.

Read Pr 31.1-9

This section echoes much of the book, although here it is the king's mother urging her son to be wise. Throughout the book, Solomon is writing to "my son," saying, "my son, choose wisdom."

The words of King Lemuel's mother echo that theme.

However, rather than spend our time here, we will concentrate on the famous Proverbs 31 Woman passage. Contrary to popular opinion, this passage was not put in your Bible so that you would have a stand-by passage to go to for Mother's Day.

**Subject: How to respond successfully to God's call to wisdom.**

**I. The structure of the passage (10-31)****A. Acrostic**

1. Each verse beginning with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
2. Kidner calls this section "An Alphabet of Wifely Excellence."
3. This structure is used several times in Hebrew poetry, most notably in Psalm 119 and in Lamentations
4. Skill of poet: Hebrew parallelism, constrained by the need to begin each thought with a word following the alphabet

## B. Chiasm (conjectural?)

### 1. Suggested by Duane Garrett (New American Commentary series)

Sideways V or left half of letter X = Greek 'chi', hence chiasm

### 2. Conjectural:

a. Is it in the mind of the original author?

b. Or does it exist only in the mind of the later interpreter?

Answer: Yes – in other words, there are some real chiasms in Hebrew poetry without a doubt. Is this one of them?

### c. Evidence

1) Bruce Waltke sees a chiasm in the passage as well, though not exactly the same as Garrett's idea

Waltke's commentary on Proverbs most thorough, the result of a lifetime of study.

2) Garrett's offering itself:

A: High value of a good wife (v. 10)

B: Husband benefited by wife (vv. 11-12)

C: Wife works hard (vv. 13-19)

D: Wife gives to poor (v. 20)

E: No fear of snow (v. 21a)

F: Children clothed in scarlet (v. 21b)

G: Coverings for bed, wife wears linen (v. 22)

H: Public respect for her husband (v. 23)

G': Sells garments and sashes (v.24)

F': Wife clothed in dignity (v. 25a)

E': No fear of future (v. 25b)

D': Wife speaks wisdom (v. 26)

C': Wife works hard (v. 27)

B': Husband and children praise wife (vv. 28-29)

A': High value of a good wife (vv. 30-31)<sup>1</sup>

The suggestion will have to stand on its own, you can study it out to see what you think of it.

<sup>1</sup> Duane A Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary 14 (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1993), 248.

It does give rise to some ideas about the passage that I'd like to address.

### C. The point of Proverbs 31 within the overall context of the book of Proverbs

1. The chiasm serves this purpose at least: it focuses attention on one verse out of the 22 that make up the poem, verse 23
  - a. Subject of verse 23: the husband
  - b. Subject of the poem: the wife (ostensibly)

Have you ever noticed that verse about the husband in the middle of the chapter?

Why is it there, do you think? (How does it fit with mother's day?)

2. The accusations of the critics: Proverbs is an editorial hodgepodge
  - a. It is a collection of writings from various periods of Jewish history
  - b. It was edited by a later editor, probably in the post-exilic period into its present form (after Ezra/Nehemiah)
  - c. The first 9 chapters were written by someone other than Solomon [the editor, probably], the rest, "Proverbs proper" was traditionally connected with Solomon and he even might have collected *some* of them
  - d. The name Solomon is inserted at the beginning to give it an imprimatur of authority and to get others to accept the book

None of these points are true, but that is what is said.

These views tend to see no unifying structure to the book of Proverbs.

## II. The theme of the women of Proverbs

- A. Proverbs is famously directed to "my son" (Pr 1.8)
- B. 'My son' is famously presented with two choices in the book of Proverbs
  1. The way of the wicked (vs. the way of wisdom) (Pr 1.10)
  2. The way of the women (Dame Wisdom and Madame Folly) (Pr.1.20)

### C. The contrasting appeals of the two women

1. Dame Wisdom's first warning (Pr 1.20-33)
2. Madame Folly, the flattering stranger first presented (Pr 2.16-19)
3. The woman of blessing (3.13-18)
4. The woman of worth (4.5-9)
5. The deceptive stranger (5.1-23)
6. The destructive stranger (6.20-35)
7. The woman of life vs. The woman of death (7.1-4, 5-27)
8. Wisdom personified: The woman of value (8.1-36)
9. The way of wisdom vs. The way of folly (9.1-6, 13-18)

These two women form a very prominent theme in the first nine chapters.

Always the underlying challenge of these passages is "Choose"

### D. The continuing theme seen in the rest of Proverbs

1. The woman makes or breaks her husband (18.22; 19.14; 12.4)
2. Unfaithfulness is a sin against the closest of friends (16.28; 17.9)
3. The wise woman stabilizes her home (14.1)

This is not intended to be exhaustive, just to show that the question and the choice of the right woman is not abandoned when we get to the "proverbial" section of Proverbs.

## III. The answer to the question: who is the man of Pr 31.23?

### A. Identifying the husband of the Pr 31 woman

1. His description
  - a. He is known in the gates (the city council)
  - b. He sits among the elders of the land (respect, position, influence)
  - c. He is a wise man, but he has more than just these distinctions
  - d. His marriage to the Pr 31 Woman gains him the benefits of all her provision *for him*.
    - 1) She does him good and not evil
    - 2) Her industry provides for him and his household

3) Her reputation is known far outside his home

4) Many speak well of her and call her blessed (and he is blessed in turn)

2. His identity? "My Son"

a. Through the book the question and the quest for wisdom is laid before him

b. Folly is destructive, wisdom is full of blessing

3. Her Identity? (or, who is the woman?)

a. Is she merely the wife of 'my son', a literal flesh and blood woman?

b. Or is she a metaphor for the wise choice of the son? Is she Dame Wisdom?

B. The unity (and inerrancy) of Proverbs

1. I identify the woman in Proverbs 31 as Dame Wisdom

She is not an impossible ideal to which mothers everywhere must conform every Mother's Day!

2. If there is any lesson in the Wisdom personified sections of Proverbs, it is that the man who chooses wisdom builds a life of blessing

3. As I consider Proverbs 31, the coincidence of the Pr 31 woman with this theme of the wise woman is no coincidence: it's on purpose

a. Solomon is responsible for all the material in Proverbs, either as author or collector, and as the primary editor

b. It is his design that puts this woman here at the end, making her husband respected and heeded

c. Proverbs is a unified book, and its statements are without error

C. The application to us

1. The subject of our message:

**Subject: How to respond successfully to God's call to wisdom.**

2. We could put that into a question like this: Who are you married to?

a. I don't mean your literal wife

- b. I mean, Are you married to Wisdom?
3. If you are married to wisdom, you are a man who has learned how to plumb the depths of God's book, applying God's wisdom to life situations (just as we see in Proverbs)

One of my commentaries, I forget which one, suggests that "the sages," the wise men of Solomon's courts, were men who were steeped in wisdom.

- They would have proverbs at their fingertips
- They would know which to select for a particular problem and when to apply it

4. Proverbs is strikingly a 'non-religious' book: we see little of temple, sacrifices, and priests here
- a. Kidner says that Proverbs is "religion with its work clothes on" – religion in daily life
- b. That's what wisdom is like, it is religion lived out in daily life

## Conclusion:

Have you given yourself to God's wisdom? Are you married to wisdom?

I am afraid that too many men today are married to the NFL, NASCAR, and video games (to name a few).

I am afraid that we are married to pleasures (innocent, clean fun), but not to wisdom.

I am afraid that we pursue fads in the religious world as well – the latest book, the latest preacher, the newest method...

And wisdom is left at home with the wife and kids to shift for herself.

Do you think that a man who is married to wisdom would really have any positive attitude towards alcohol? Does Proverbs *ever* paint alcohol in a positive light?

Pursue the themes of Proverbs. Don't just read a chapter a day, do some exegesis through the book, a bit here and a bit there. Learn what it means to be a wise man, a 'sage'.

Men, let's pursue wisdom, let's get it, and with it, get understanding.