

PROVERBS

Chapter 31

The Words of King Lemuel

The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him: 2 What are you doing, my son? What are you doing, son of my womb? What are you doing, son of my vows? 3 Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings. 4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, 5 lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted. 6 Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; 7 let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. 8 Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. 9 Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

31:1–9 This brief section is also of non-Israelite origin. King Lemuel is otherwise unknown. (CSB)

As was the case with Agur in the last chapter, we are not sure who King Lemuel is. Ancient rabbis took this to be a pen name for Solomon. The name Lemuel means “He who is for God.” (PBC)

31:1 *King Lemuel*. Means “dedicated to God.” Some biblical scholars suggest that it may be a pseudonym for King Hezekiah (2Ki 18:5) or possibly King Josiah (2Ki 23:25). (TLSB)

his mother. This entire chapter emphasizes the role and significance of wise women. The queen mother was an influential figure (see 1Ki 1:11–13; 15:13). (CSB)

Mothers were expected to provide the earliest lessons for children. However, Lemuel’s mother played a larger role in preparing her son to be king. She was even given words of instruction either directly from God or from a prophet. In any case, because she taught and ingrained God’s Word into her son’s mind, these words became his words. (TLSB)

In the ancient Near East, mothers were strong influences. We think of women like Sarah and Rebekah, or of Solomon’s mother Bathsheba. (PBC)

31:2 *son of my vows*. Hannah made a vow as she prayed for a son (1Sa 1:11). (CSB)

Marriage vows or perhaps a vow like Hannah’s, who offered her son Samuel in service to the Lord (1Sm 1:11). (TLSB)

31:3 *your strength to women*. A warning against a large harem and sexual immorality (see 5:9–11 and notes; 1Ki 11:1; Ne 13:26). (CSB)

Warning against sexual immorality. (TLSB)

Women proved the downfall for one as wise and great as Solomon. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Years later Nehemiah recalled how Solomon’s foreign wives had led him into idolatry. (Nehemiah 13:26) (PBC)

For a king or any man in a position of leadership to spend his energy in the delights of the harem instead of concentrating his on his duties could bring ruin. Many a modern politician has also been brought to ruin by getting caught up with women, in particular in illicit affairs. (PBC)

31:4 *It is not for kings ... to drink wine.* Woe to the land whose rulers are drunkards (Ecc 10:16–17; Hos 7:5). (CSB)

31:5 *pervert the right of all the afflicted.* See Isa 5:23; 10:2. (CSB)

A good wife teaches her husband to avoid craving beer and drinking to the point of forgetfulness. (PBC)

31:6–7 Does not condone the abuse of alcohol or drunkenness, just as vv 4–5 do not absolutely prohibit alcohol. Alcohol was valued as medication and for relaxation. (TLSB)

31:6 *who is perishing...bitter distress* – Beer and wine can be the ruin of leaders. At the same time, if used properly, they can be a blessing to dull the pain of those who are suffering. When Jesus hung on the cross, He was offered wine. Even in His suffering, our King refused (Mark 15:23). He chose to bear the full pain, as He suffered in our stead. (PBC)

31:7 *let them drink and forget.* A good king is not concerned about indulging himself; he is too interested in the welfare of his people. (PBC)

31:8–9 The king represents God as the defender of the poor and needy (see 16:10; Ps 82:3; cf. Lev 19:15; Job 29:12–17; Isa 1:17). (CSB)

These powerful verses lend themselves to many applications, such as defending a person who is an object of gossip. They are frequently applied to the many babies who are killed through legalized abortion in our day. (PBC)

The words of Lemuel are aimed at leaders. Yet they apply to every Christian. As we help those in need, we show our love for Jesus Himself. He tells us, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:31-46). (CSB)

31:1–9 King Lemuel was taught God’s Word by his mother in order to equip him to serve his subjects. While we may never find ourselves in such a high position of authority, let us learn from his mother’s example. Rather than focusing her teaching on how he could achieve financial and material success or how to increase his power, she taught him God’s Word. God’s Word from cover to cover bears witness first and foremost to another son: God’s Son, who, at the appropriate time, took on human flesh and was born to a virgin mother. He did so to fulfill God’s promise to bless all nations (Gn 12:2–3). Indeed, His death for the sins of the entire world (1Jn 2:2) opened up the gates to heaven. • O Christ, the Word of God, You came to serve humankind. Guide us to bring hope to others and serve even the poorest of our neighbors. Amen. (TLSB)

The Woman Who Fears the LORD

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. 5 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.

31:10–31 The epilogue: an acrostic poem (see NIV text note) praising the “wife of noble character” (v. 10). It corresponds to 1:1–7 (the prologue) as it describes a “woman who fears the LORD” (v. 30; see note on 1:7). Such a wife is almost a personification of wisdom. Like wisdom, she is “worth far more than rubies” (v. 10; 3:15; 8:11), and he who finds her “receives favor from the LORD” (8:35; 18:22). See Introduction: Literary Structure. (CSB)

Acrostic poem; each line begins with a letter of the Hbr alphabet. No indication who wrote this final section of Pr. See pp 777–78. On account of its different style, this poem is probably not an extension of King Lemuel’s words. Yet this is a wonderful poem, praising virtuous women. It also serves to instruct men in what to look for in a potential spouse. The woman described here is truly remarkable. While it is often assumed that women played a subservient role in the home and society of ancient Israel, this woman defies such description. Not only is she the manager of the household, she is also a shrewd businesswoman (and is praised for it). Notice, however, that everything she does is for her family and, by extension, her community. She lives and works for the well-being and livelihood of others. She is not interested in promoting her own self-worth, but her worth is demonstrated by her service, which is ultimately motivated by her love for God. Such a woman should be treasured and honored. (TLSB)

Standing of Women. The test of adultery (5:11–31), the capture of Midianite girls (31:18), and the laws about women’s vows (30:3–16) have been cited as evidence that the Bible teaches suppression of women or that women were owned and valued much like cattle. Such an interpretation does not take into account the cultural environment of the second millennium BC or what Scripture, in other places, teaches about men and women (see note, 30:3–16). The example of the daughters of Zelophehad (27:1–11; ch 36) tells a different story; these single women were allowed to inherit their father’s property and could choose husbands for themselves (36:6). (TLSB p. 216)

31:10 *an excellent wife who can find.* Like Ruth (Ru 3:11). She is “her husband’s crown” (12:4). (CSB)

When young people look for a life-long partner, what do they look for? Physical attraction is usually high on the list. So is having fun together. Somewhere down the list comes the person’s character. The Bible puts it at the top. Godly character is rare and to find it in one’s spouse is a very, very special gift from above. As rare jewels are the most valuable, so the rarest of traits are also the most valuable. (PBC)

31:11 trusts – Without confidence in one another, a marriage can never be ideal. When there is complete confidence in the other person, everything else of value falls into place. (PBC)

31:12 She does him good. She continually – all the days of her life! – seeks to be supportive and encouraging. She doesn't bring him down. (PBC)

31:13 flax. Its fibers were made into linen (see Isa 19:9). (CSB)

Used to make linen, a costly material worn by the wealthy. (TLSB)

works with willing hands – It literally says, “She makes according to the pleasure of her hands.” It's as if her very hands enjoy the work. In other words, she likes what she does. And she does it with vigor (verse 17). (PBC)

31:14 like ships of the merchant. She is an enterprising person (see v. 18). (CSB)

She is enterprising and industrious. In providing for her family, she supplies not only what is convenient but also adds variety and novelty. (TLSB)

This brings to mind the ships of Solomon. “The king has a fleet of trading ships. ..Once every three years it returned carrying gold, silver and ivory, and apes and baboons” (1 Kings 10:22). From the Red Sea port of Ezion Geber his ships sailed to Arabia and possibly on to faraway India. The noble wife goes out of her way to obtain the best for her family. (PBC)

31:15 She rises while it is yet night. She is the opposite of the sluggard (see 6:9–10; 20:13). (CSB)

portions for her servant girls. See 27:27; Lk 12:42. (CSB)

The mention of servants in this verse gives the impression of a wealthy family. The context also indicates that the wealth came honestly and that her love extends to her servants as well as to her own family. While many Christian wives may not have the kind of wealth described here, all can have her kind of character. (PBC)

31:16 considers a field ... plants a vineyard. She shows good judgment—unlike the sluggard, whose vineyard is overgrown with thorns and weeds (24:30–31). (CSB)

Activities normally associated with men in the OT. However, Israelite women enjoyed more freedom than has sometimes been granted by commentators. (TLSB)

She, like Solomon, may have overseen the work. (PBC)

31:18 her merchandise is profitable. Like wisdom, she is “worth far more than rubies” (v. 10; 3:15; 8:11). Wisdom “is more profitable than silver” (3:14). (CSB)

her lamp does not go out at night – Mention of her lamp not going out at night could refer to her working into the night. It could also mean that the household is prosperous enough to keep a lamp burning all night. Having one's lamp go out was symbolic of God's disfavor (Job 18:5). (PBC)

She could afford to have enough oil to keep the lamps burning throughout the night in case any family members awoke in the dark and had to move about in the house. (TLSB)

31:19 *distaff... spindle*. Spinning thread was women's work. (CSB)

31:20 *reaches out her hands to the needy*. see Job 31:16–20. (CSB)

Her concern for the poor in this verse reflects an earlier proverb: “A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed” (Proverbs 11:25). A number of verses in Proverbs 31:10-31 refer to the woman's hands and arms. In a concrete way, they represent the activity of her entire person. (PBC)

31:21 *clothed in scarlet*. Of high quality, probably made of wool (cf. 2Sa 1:24; Rev 18:16). (CSB)

Due to her industriousness and shrewdness, she clothes her family with the highest quality and most expensive clothes. (TLSB)

Winters in Palestine are cold and rainy, and sometimes it even snows. (PBC)

31:22 *fine linen*. Associated with nobility (CSB)

Not only does she see to it that they are kept warm, but she also provides the finest clothing possible. (PBC)

purple. Linked with kings (Jdg 8:26; SS 3:10) or the rich (Lk 16:19; Rev 18:16). (CSB)

Expensive dye. (TLSB)

31:23 *known in the gates*. The court. (CSB)

Her accomplishments and good reputation bring additional respect to her husband. (TLSB)

The city gate was the place where business and important discussions were held in Middle Eastern towns. This verse tells of her husband being respected at the city gate as he meets with city leaders. A good part of that respect comes from the kind of wife he has. She brings him admiration. (PBC)

31:24 *linen garments*. See Jdg 14:12–13; Isa 3:23. (CSB)

In addition to her household duties, she also makes a profit through the work she does, and does well, on the side. (TLSB)

She is the consummate seamstress, doing everything from spinning thread (verse 19) to selling linen and sashes in this verse. (PBC)

31:25 *strength and dignity are her clothing*. See Isa 52:1; 1Ti 2:9–10. The opposite is to be “clothed with shame and disgrace” (Ps 35:26). (CSB)

Much is said of how she clothes her family. The real beauty of her appearance comes not from the materials she wears, but from her inner qualities – strength, dignity, confidence, wisdom, faithfulness, concern, and industriousness. (PBC)

she laughs at the days to come. She is free of anxiety and worry (cf. Job 39:7). (CSB)

Her godly diligence protects her against the future. May we all, trusting that God will always provide for us, continue to work hard in our vocations and stations in life for the sake of our family, neighbors, and communities! (TLSB)

31:26 *opens her mouth with wisdom* – hokmah – The most frequently used word for wisdom and refers to practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is the chief concept in Proverbs. (PBC)

31:28 *blessed.* That is, one who enjoys happy circumstances and from whom joy radiates to others. See Ge 30:13; Ps 72:17; SS 6:9; Mal 3:12; cf. Ru 4:14–15. (CSB)

No wonder her family praises her! It is a thing of beauty to see children raised by a believing mother; as they grow older they return her love more and more. Her husband, who owes so much to her, also showers her with heartfelt praise. (PBC)

31:29 *done excellently.* See Isa 32:8. (CSB)

31:30–31 Men should not take their wives for granted. Not only should they love and praise them in the home but also in public. St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “You have been enabled to reject the deceitful glory of the world... you deserve to be praised for not being deceived” (*SLSB*, p 216). (TLSB)

31:30 *beauty is vain.* Cf. Job 14:2; 1Pe 3:3–5. (CSB)

Literally, it is “a breath”; it evaporates like a fleeting breath on a cold day. (This is the same Hebrew words translated “meaningless” in Ecclesiastes 1:2-3). (PBC)

who fears the LORD. Essential characteristic of an exceptional woman (and man) is fear of the Lord—for only those who fear the Lord will obtain the wisdom to accomplish all the other attributes described above. (TLSB)

What comes from fearing God is anything but fleeting. It lasts a lifetime and beyond. (PBC)

31:31 *praise her.* Honor comes through “humility and the fear of the LORD” (22:4). (CSB)

in the gates. What she does for her family isn’t done to glorify herself. But as a by-product of her fearing the Lord, they – and others – praise her. She’s praised not only in the privacy of the home, but in the city gate as well. (PBC)

31:10–31 The most basic human relationship, according to God’s design, is the joining of a man and woman in holy matrimony. However, due to our active rebellion, this relationship has been undermined. In His mercy, God still blesses our marriages. Since our relationship with the Creator is restored in Christ, this likewise serves to restore our marriages and all other human relationships. • O Lord, grant a faithful and diligent spouse to Your child. Bind the hearts of all who marry in lasting love and mutual care, through Christ Jesus, who gave His life for His Bride, the Church. Amen. (TLSB)