

“A Progressive View from an Ancient Text”

Proverbs 31:10–31

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

September 19, 2021

As many of you know, I did not grow up in the church. My mother left the church when I was very young for several reasons — its opposition to integration, its condemnation of anyone who had suffered through a divorce, and its subjugation of women. She didn’t give up her faith, she just didn’t believe any of these stances on significant matters squared with the teachings of Jesus. After finding the church on my own and having been in ministry for nearly forty years now, I cannot say that I disagree with her. But I am thankful that she was able to find her way back to the church near the end of her far-too-short life.

Our reading from Proverbs 31, or at least the traditional use of it, is Exhibit A for the church’s view of women that troubled my mother. “A capable wife who can find?” the passage begins in the NRSV, or as the KJV says, “Who can find a virtuous woman?” Really? More of us would agree with Flannery O’Connor who wrote a short story entitled “A Good *Man* Is Hard to Find” (emphasis mine). Is it more difficult to find good women or good men?

In the reading from Mark, the answer is men. Jesus has just predicted his suffering and death for the second of three times, and as they do on every one of these occasions, his disciples, his hand-chosen twelve men, the best of the lot, miss the point. The first time Jesus tells them about his fate, Peter rebukes him. This time the boys — think of them as the twelve stooges — immediately begin a conversation about who is the greatest among them. Jesus talks about his death and they want to know who gets to sit in the big chair. But the next time, it gets even worse. James and John want to sit at Jesus’ right and left in glory! As one scholar has said, Jesus’ closest followers are so dense that light bends around them (C. Clifton Black, *workingpreacher.org*).

It’s but one of many examples that indicate that finding good men is the challenge, but Proverbs talks about the challenge of finding a good

woman, and then it goes on, or at least, it is remembered as going on, in a way that perpetuates stereotypes. But does the text itself do this? I want to suggest that while there are some words of caution we need to consider, the text itself presents a pretty progressive view of women, indeed more progressive than many churches embrace now.

The first thing we need to know is that in Hebrew this reading is an acrostic. Each sentence begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet beginning with *Aleph* and ending with *Taw* and each verse goes on to describe the ideal wife/woman. Perhaps this is a device to help the reader or hearer commit the passage to memory.

From a literary perspective, the passage is also chiasmic. It is like an envelope; each half mirrors the other. Remember this when we consider a possible interpretation in a moment.

So, textually speaking, this is a carefully constructed literary piece, designed to communicate a message in memorable form. There is no YouTube in this time, but if there were, this writer would be all over it!

In regard to the context, we don't know a great deal, but the first verse of chapter 31 says these are the words of King Lemuel, an oracle his mother taught him. If this is true, we have fuel to add to the fire in many troubled family systems. These are the words of a future mother-in-law describing the ideal daughter-in-law! Now, that makes sense!

Yet we don't know for sure that these latter verses are connected. And while these words describe the ideal woman/wife and say nothing about the ideal man/husband, they are similar to passages in the book of Proverbs which describe the attributes of the ideal man/husband. Thus, read in the context of the whole book, this passage doesn't scream "one-sided perspective" quite as much.

Further, the book of Proverbs begins with an image of wisdom as a woman crying out in the street (1:20f). It is not what we expect in this time, but wisdom is personified in female form and then we have all the attributes of wisdom attached to a woman in this passage in the last chapter of the book. This has led some scholars to wonder whether the author is talking about a woman or perhaps just closing the envelope the way he/she started it – by personifying wisdom as a woman. The last

section of the last chapter is chiasmic. Perhaps the whole book is. Thus, what we have is a model for all women and men, a picture of the ideal life, not just the ideal wife.

But following the most basic reading of the story, what does the text say about this would-be ideal woman? She is industrious, loyal to her family and faithful to God. These are all noble qualities, but taken alone and given a certain twist, we might conjure up images of June Cleaver... for those old enough to understand the reference. A careful reading of the text reveals a different image.

The passage begins with a question about the “capable” or “virtuous” wife. But the Hebrew word *chayil* can denote strength or valor, especially in military contexts. We might translate, “Who can find a *courageous* wife/woman?” Later in the passage, the author says this ideal woman girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong. Strength and dignity are her clothing. And when the author says she rises while it is still night and provides food for her household, we might think of an early riser baking bread, but the better understanding may be of a hunter seeking out prey so as to provide meat for the table.

This is not an image of a subservient creature. This is an image of an equal partner, a co-laborer worthy to share the work of a King. She considers the needs of the poor, as any King should, and her works praise her in the city gates. She is respected in the public square, as a King would want to be. As one writer puts it, “(She) is a match, a faithful partner, to be respected and not dominated (Nanette Sawyer, *The Christian Century*, September 8, 2021, p. 20).” And she not only shares the work; she shares all the work. Labor is not gender divided.

So, what might this say about women and men today? Well, contrary to popular opinion, the Bible, at least in passages like this one, actually presents a more progressive view than we have. I know we think we believe in equality. We look down on nations where women seem to be subservient. We think of Islam as a religion that fails to recognize the full potential of women, forcing them to be covered up and limiting their avenues to education. The Taliban’s role in Afghanistan right now provides the obvious foil to our nobility.

There is no argument that makes the Taliban look good, but they do not represent all Muslims or all Muslim nations nor have we risen to all the noble aspirations we claim. Pakistan, a predominately Muslim nation, has had a female head of state. We have not. While we may not require women to cover up, we objectify women in numerous ways. And recent abortion laws and other actions make thoughtful people wonder if *The Handmaid's Tale* is not just a dystopian fantasy.

In the church, women have made progress. We have had female deacons here since the nineteenth century and we have ordained women for ministry for half a century, though we have not called a female pastor yet. There has been a glass ceiling for female clergy. Yet while progress has been made, it is not universal. Many churches, even in this highly educated community, relegate women to subservient roles. Many churches that target young adults do not view women as equal partners. And the Roman Catholic Church, the largest expression of our faith, claiming 1.2 billion members, still denies priesthood to women.

There was a joke that circulated among professors at the University of Notre Dame in the early 1990s about a day God appeared to Pope John Paul II in a visible way while he was praying. He was humbled but then realized his opportunity, so he asked, "As long as we are talking, can I ask you a few questions?" "Sure," said God, "Go ahead." "Will there ever be married priests?" asked the Pope. "Not as long as you are Pope," said God. "Will there ever be female priests?" asked the Pope. "Not as long as you are Pope," said God. "Will there ever be another Polish Pope?" asked the Pope. God replied, "Not as long as I am God."

It was not an attack on Polish people or Catholicism. These were faithful Catholic people, including priests, questioning the church's stance through humor. But the reality is women are still viewed as unworthy of this role. How can this be in the year 2021 when three thousand years ago the wisdom writer presented a view of women as co-laborers in every way, when Jesus embraced women as equal partners, when women preached and led in the early church?

The institutional church may have kept women back, but we shouldn't blame scripture, and we certainly shouldn't blame God. The reading from Proverbs presents a progressive view of women.

But there are a couple of words of caution we need to express here. First, *woman* does not equal *wife*. Not all women marry or have to marry or find their primary identity as wife. Marriage is wonderful, but it does not define or exhaust the possibilities of female identity. Think of women like Mother Teresa and Lottie Moon in recent times, faithful women, courageous leaders, never married. Historically speaking, think of women like Queen Elizabeth I of England and anchoress Julian of Norwich, influential women who never married. *Good or capable woman* does not equal *good or capable wife*.

Second, we need to be mindful of unreasonable expectations. The image we find in Proverbs 31 is of a woman who does everything well all the time. What man or woman can live up to that expectation? Does this person have any time for self-care or spiritual centering? Considering this risk of the text, Presbyterian minister Nanette Sawyer recalls a perfume ad that aired in 1979 (*The Christian Century*, September 8, 2021, p. 20). It was based on the Peggy Lee song “I’m a Woman.” Three women appear — one dressed for work, one in a bathrobe, one in a formfitting satin dress — all singing about all the things a woman can do as a working woman, wife and mother. One line in the commercial is, “I can bring home the bacon/Fry it up in the pan/And never, never, never let you forget you’re a man.”

Not only does this ad perpetuate stereotypes, it presents an image of Wonder Woman as the norm. As Sawyer points out, this woman may be able to do everything, but it takes three of her to do it! Too many women feel pressure to do the work of three people. Women today need some relief, permission not to have to do it all.

There is no perfect formula, but in our household, we have sought to share responsibilities so that everything that needs to get done gets done. It’s not a 50/50 split in every arena all the time. As in Proverbs, our roles are not gender driven. I am more likely to cook while Dana is more likely to paint, though we can both do both. But the goal is to share responsibility, make decisions together, be co-laborers. That seems like the best way to pursue equality without exhausting anyone. That seems like a worthy goal for all people, women and men, doing anything together. And it squares with teaching of Proverbs.