



## Women in the Bible

### Hebrew Bible: The Woman of Valor

#### Proverbs 31:10-31

Who is this “capable wife” portrayed in Proverbs 31? She is trustworthy and generous, handy in the kitchen as well as the yard, wise and happy. Dr. Lin observes that this proverb is sometimes read aloud on Mother’s Day or at a renewal of vows as a way to celebrate those women who occupy this traditional role. This is one way to read the passage, but it does not fully plumb the depths of potential meaning in this list of advice.

#### Book of Proverbs

Dr. Vayntrub says that this surface interpretation takes the passage out of its broader context within the Hebrew Bible. It is therefore helpful to examine the genre and purpose of the Book of Proverbs.

The book is part of the Writings section of the Hebrew Bible, which also include the Psalms and the Book of Job. Although it is traditionally attributed to King Solomon, it is less likely that he wrote the proverbs than that they came to be associated with him precisely because of his wisdom. The book can be read from beginning to end, section by section, or by pondering each saying on its own.

The teachings are addressed, in the NRSV Bible, in a gender-neutral way: “Hear, my child, your father’s instruction, and do not reject your mother’s teaching” (Prov 1:8). The Hebrew, though, makes it clear that this material is directed at sons because males would have been the primary recipients of education. Dr. Vayntrub draws our attention to this fact, reminding us that the majority of the Book of Proverbs is advice from a father to a son.

Furthermore, the advice in Proverbs 31 may be true in a literal sense, but Dr. Vayntrub encourages us to think abstractly about the principle behind each teaching. The very first chapter of the book teaches the reader not to join a gang, essentially. While it certainly means that the son should literally not join sinners who say, “Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood” (Prov 1:11), the same chapter also goes on to encourage the pursuit of wisdom. When reading Proverbs, it is important to look for these higher principles that proverbs are trying to plant in the pupils.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs showcase two different female characters, neither of which is human: Wisdom and Folly. Both nouns are gendered female in Hebrew, which lends them especially

well to being personified as women. Wisdom is characterized as a prophet (Prov 1:20-33), a sister (7:4), and a master worker at God's side (8:30). Folly, on the other hand, is a prostitute (7:10), a loud woman who knows nothing (9:13). When Proverbs talks about the "foolish woman" and the "wise woman," it is illustrating the higher principles of folly and wisdom rather than talking about two specific women.

### A "Capable Wife"

Is this also the case, then, in the final chapter, which describes the "capable wife" who is so difficult to find? Certainly, in the context of Proverbs this passage is not advice given *to women* about how to be good wives. Rather, it is advice given *to a man* about how to be prudent in arranging his life by choosing a wife who is more like personified Wisdom than like personified Folly.

The word sometimes translated as "capable" in Proverbs 31:10 can also be translated as valiant, worthy, or even mighty. It is the same word that Boaz uses to describe Ruth in Ruth 3:11: "I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman."

Indeed, the woman in Proverbs 31 is capable; it seems that she never sleeps! "She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household" (Prov 31:15), then buys a field and plants a vineyard, gives to the poor, makes her own clothes, and sells garments in the market. "Her lamp does not go out at night" (Prov 31:18).

It is notable that while most of Proverbs is advice from father (and mother, perhaps) to son, at the beginning of chapter 31, this changes: the advice about the capable wife comes exclusively from the mother.

Dr. Vayntrub suggests that the women who appear in the Book of Proverbs are obviously flat characters, not portraits of real women. Along with Wisdom and Folly as these two-dimensional literary devices, we find the Capable Wife: unrealistic and intended to point to higher principles.

One hint at this idea is the penultimate verse in the chapter: "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (Prov 31:30). Remember that Proverbs is usually pointing at an abstract idea in its specifics. Choosing the right wife, the text seems to say, requires attention to substance instead of beauty. The principle at work is a preference for wisdom in one's life partner – and that is advice applicable to our time, too.

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