

### Third Appendix: The Wife of Noble Character (Proverbs 31:10–31)

That the whole book should end in this way is a surprise and a puzzle. Why should the woman have the last word? It is clearly a deliberate choice on the part of the final editor to round off the whole collection thus, but why? Many answers have been given, of which the following are the strongest contestants.

1. It continues the advice given to King Lemuel by his mother (vv. 1–9). Having warned him against loose women (v. 3) she now describes the sort of woman with whom she would like him to settle down. This would balance the impossible duty given him in verses 8–9 to act as advocate for one unable to defend himself. The standard demanded of the *noble wife* (v. 10) is equally unattainable. If v. 8f were hinting at the ideal King, the Messiah, is this a picture of his bride, the church (cf. Eph. 5:25–33)? A tempting theory but LXX separates 31:1–9 from 10–31 by five chapters, and LXX antedates any existing Hebrew documents of PROVERBS by centuries!

2. It is marriage guidance for all, to be put alongside all the other advice given to the young to make them wise. ‘It shows what wives the women should make and the men should choose’ (Henry). The theme briefly touched on in 12:4, 14:1,

18:22, 19:14 is here developed fully. It is however an impossible ideal, one to be striven for rather than expected. This is implied in, *who can find?* and corresponds to what is said of men in 20:6: ‘A faithful man who can find?’ However, verse 29 somewhat qualifies this view, though perhaps the apostles’ pattern is more attainable (1 Tim. 2:9f, 1 Pet. 3:1–7).

3. It continues in the cynical vein of those earlier sayings about women who are impossible to live with: 11:22, 19:13, 21:9, 19, 25:24, 27:15. To say *who can find a wife of noble character* is to say, ‘It would be a miracle if there were such a person and an even greater one if I managed to find her!’ However, it is unlikely that a book of wisdom would end on such a negative note.

4. Another cynical explanation is that it is a male view of womanhood. It is what men would like their wives to be rather than how they see themselves and their role. But this makes it difficult to see the passage as the word of God.

5. It is to show that the home and family are foundational to life, since these qualities should be common to us all. But because domestic life is common doesn’t mean it is commonplace; in fact it can be the best, happiest and most beautiful aspect of life. Since its success depends most on the woman she is singled out as the chief character, although other members of the family have their place. Domesticity is thus a large part of Wis-

dom.

6. It affords a summary of the whole life-style of the wise. The many qualities and activities which feature here are all commended throughout the book as worthy aims. They are not to be seen as for special people but for the homely. Wisdom is most at home when it is at home! The woman verges on being the personification of Wisdom, of whom so much was said in the Prologue (4:5–9, 9:1–6) which may come from the same hand as the Epilogue. This would explain the idealization of the *wife*, since Wisdom is perfect, and also why she is compared with rubies (cf. 3:15, 8:11, 20:15).

The qualities which are described from verse 11 are arranged in ‘acrostic’ form, that is, each of the 22 verses begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order. Thus verse 10 begins with the word ‘ESHETH (‘woman’ or wife). The breathing represented by’ is ALEPH, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, the nearest to our A although it is neither vowel nor consonant. Now follow the characteristics of the *noble wife*.

### 1. Reliable and trustworthy (v. 11)

This verse begins with BATACH, ‘trust’. This acrostic form not only made it easier to memorize in an age without printing, but also put a stress on the leading idea in the sentence, which makes this verse about *confidence*. The *husband* who is responsible for providing for the house-

hold may have many worries. If he can entrust the housekeeping to his wife his mind will be at rest and he will be able to concentrate better on his own work.

### 2. Supportive and loyal (v. 12)

This verse shows how *she* has gained the confidence of her husband—through her positive attitude to marriage. Her aim is to *bring him good, not harm*, hence the opening word GAMAL (the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet is GIMEL similar to our G) which means to perform or accomplish. It describes what she sees as the purpose of *the days of her life* as a married woman: to support her husband in his chosen calling. This may sound strange in these liberated days when partners often follow separate careers, but it has been proved to keep couples together for a life-time, as the word *all* here implies.

### 3. Efficient and energetic (v. 13)

The first word is DARASH, meaning carefully seeking and choosing (*selects*). Making clothes for the household from *wool* and *flax*, or linen, was common practice, for apart from the great and rich, clothes would all be home-made. What is ‘noble’ here is not just making the clothes but *selecting* good material (which might have needed spinning first, v. 19), plus the enjoyment she derived from doing it (*eager*). Although older daughters and servants may have helped, she both supervised and participated. Industrious-

ness is encouraged under the Gospel as well as the law (1 Tim. 2:9f, 5:10f, Titus 2:5).

#### 4. Considerate and painstaking (v. 14)

The opening word HAY-THAH begins with the fifth letter and means *she is*. Normally the personal pronoun is omitted which shows that it is emphasized here: it is the ‘noble wife’ herself who does or at least organizes the shopping. She is as careful in selecting a balanced and varied menu as she is in choosing her material (v. 13), for she wants her family to eat what is both nutritious and enjoyable. This may involve the inconvenience of travel. But since the *merchant ships* take the trouble to *bring food from afar* why shouldn’t the mother? Also, she may be able to buy food more cheaply or in bulk further away.

#### 5. Unselfish and disciplined (v. 15)

*Food* has not only to be purchased for the larder but prepared for the table. Whoever does this has to be at work far in advance of those who will eat it; in the case of breakfast this is before they are up. So the emphasis here falls on her early rising: *she gets up while it is still dark*. The sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet is one to which our W is the nearest equivalent and is most frequently used for the conjunction ‘and’ or ‘also’ (not translated here by NIV, but see KJV, etc.). It indicates she takes trouble not only over the shopping (v. 14) but ‘also’ the cooking. She is

even ahead of the *servant girls*, who need breakfast if they are to work efficiently. How few mistresses would see the advantage of freeing them from the chore of making their own breakfast so that they can give themselves to their other tasks?

#### 6. Business-like and cautious (v. 16)

Having fed the household early she is free to improve the family fortunes. The opening word ZAM-MAH means examine, weigh up: *she considers* what the most profitable enterprise would be—land. Clearly her husband works in the town, possibly in government (v. 23), or he would be doing this. But what sort of land? A *field* fit for cultivation. So her thinking now is devoted to finding a *field* suitable for *planting a vineyard*. While researching this she also *considers* what funds are available not only for the purchase but the cultivation of *the field*. This means calculating her *earnings*, that is, the profits from the sale of some of the garments made (vs. 13, 19, 24). A rare wife indeed!

#### 7. Fit and strong (v. 17)

She does not confine herself to the administrative side of business and is not above manual work. The first word CHAGARAH, beginning with the eighth letter (a guttural CH sound) means literally ‘she girds herself (NKJV), a metaphorical expression like our ‘roll up the sleeves’. In order to tackle the job *vigorously* she needs to be physically fit. Her

generally disciplined life and regular manual work make her *arms strong* for this demanding task.

#### 8. Efficient and successful (v. 18)

Unlike others her duties are not over at sunset, for to *see that her trading is profitable* she must supervise the sale of the vineyard's produce. The opening word TACH-MAH is literally 'she tastes', meaning she personally ensures the profitability of the enterprise. This may involve her working into the evening at her correspondence and accounts. However, to say *her lamp does not go out at night* doesn't mean she never went to bed! Darkness began at about 6 p.m. which would leave several hours working by artificial light before bedtime. A wise person doesn't burn the candle at both ends (v. 15)!

#### 9. Skilful and diligent (v. 19)

Before wool can be made into clothes (vv. 13, 24) it has to be spun. This is skillful work, done entirely *by hand* in those days, for the spinning wheel was still a long way off. So the stress falls on *her hands*, the word with which the sentence begins, whose initial letter corresponds to our Y. The terms translated *distaff* and *spindle* are unique and it is impossible to visualize exactly how the work was done. Presumably one *hand* held the *distaff* which spun the wool (possibly with the use of a weight) while the *fingers* of the other held the *spindle*, on to which the thread was wound. A difficult time-consuming job

and she was 'noble' indeed to tackle it along with her other duties.

#### 10. Generous and charitable (v. 20)

NIV doesn't bring out that the same two words for *hands* are used here as in verse 19, but in reverse order: the one that is second in verse 19 here begins the sentence—KAPPACH. The *hands* she used for spinning wool *she extends to the poor and needy*. She thinks not only of her own profit but others' poverty, and 'is as intent on giving as on getting' (Henry). Here is the first indication that she was not only 'a noble wife' but a good child of God who expects the better-off to help the worse-off, both under the law (19:17, 22:9, Deut. 15:11) and the Gospel (Mark 14:7, Heb.13:16).

#### 11. Practical and prepared (v. 21)

The sentence begins with LO, 'not', since in Hebrew the negative precedes the verb. It highlights the fact that 'a noble wife' thinks not only of prosperity but of possible adversity—she is practical. *Snow* is infrequent in the Middle East but not unknown, so she takes no chances but prepares for it by seeing her family and servants have warm as well as cool clothing. The *scarlet* cloth was expensive, being dyed as well as woven. Perhaps the bright colour had a psychological effect, being a startling contrast to the normal white clothing for hot weather. What a clever and thoughtful woman.



### 12. Tasteful and dignified (v. 22)

The opening word is MAR-BAD, *coverings*, but the question is whether they were for the *bed* (NIV), the walls (NKJV), the floors (RV) or the body (KJV)! The Hebrew simply says ‘for herself, but *she is clothed* in line 2 makes clothing the most likely meaning. The material, which she made up herself, was imported, the *fine linen* from Egypt and the *purple* from Phoenicia. Does she turn out after all to be a worldly woman, breaking the rules of modesty in dress (1 Tim. 2:9f, 1 Pet. 3:3f)? Wasn’t it ‘the rich man who was dressed in *purple* and *fine linen*’ (Luke 16:19)? However, dress needn’t imply luxury and show, but can reflect position in society. She was wife to an elder of the city (v. 23) and had to command respect. It is those who try to ape the great, and especially neglect the inward graces and cover this with gorgeous apparel who are in view in 1 Peter 3:3. Verse 25 shows she had these.

### 13. Devoted and submissive (v. 23)

The verse begins with NODACH, ‘known’ which has the sense of *respected*, well-known, of good reputation. But it is *her husband* to whom this applies, for he has a *seat among the elders of the land* or district. Since throughout PROVERBS prosperity and success are the reward of Wisdom, he is clearly one of the wisest. But this is due in part to the character and ability of his wife. Although she herself is not prominent in local affairs, which were con-

ducted *at the city gate*, she shares his reputation through her union with him. This explains her dress (v. 22).

### 14. Observant and opportunist (v. 24)

The SADIN, the *linen garment*, was probably a summer dress, for which she also made a *sash*, thus having a complete outfit for sale. The materials used for this were local and therefore plentiful, and having her own workers she could produce it cheaply and sell it to *merchants*, possibly in exchange for the more exotic winter clothes (v. 21). A woman who saw and took her opportunities.

### 15. Strong and secure (v. 25)

The sixteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet is another guttural similar to the eighth and begins the word CHOZ, *strength*, which stands at the beginning of the sentence. One who has so much going for her as this wife can easily trust her position and possessions. *Her* security, however, lay in her *strength* of character, which gave her *dignity* or self-respect, qualities able to bear up should circumstances change *in the days to come*. She *can laugh at* these, not because she thought her fortunes would never change, like the Rich Fool (Luke 12:19), but because she was positive-minded.

### 16. Discreet and wise (v. 26)

The verse begins with PIYAH, ‘her mouth’, so for the first time we are told of what *she speaks*. Her conversation is char-

acterised by two things: *wisdom* and love. We have heard enough to believe this was a wise woman, taking her place alongside such as Abigail (1 Sam. 25:24–31) and Priscilla (Acts 18:26). As the wife of a senator she would need to speak discreetly and be able to give sound advice to any who applied to her. But she did better than that, for the phrase *faithful instruction* brings together two of the greatest words in the Old Testament: TORAH, the teaching of God (cf. 1:8), and HESED, which describes the spirit of kindness and faithful love with which God made his covenant with Israel. This was what she passed on, in and out of her home.

#### 17. Aware and involved (v. 27)

The verse begins with TSOPHIYAH, so that *watches over* is the idea emphasised. Although a woman she is a true leader of those under her, whether children, servants or outside workers. She doesn't merely give orders and leave them to it, but sees how they are managing. She is in touch with what is happening, but still attends to her own work, so is far from *idle*. Long before Paul wrote, 'If a man will not work he shall not eat' (2 Thess. 3:10), she was practising it. If she did not do her share of the work of the house and estate she would feel she had no right to enjoy its profits (*bread*).

#### 18. Appreciated and commended (vv. 28–31)

The passage ends by showing how others

respond to her. Verse 28 begins with QAMO, *arise*, which conjures up a picture of a standing ovation, an expression of the appreciation which comes from four directions.

(a) *Her children* (v. 28a). This must have made her happier than all the wealth, prosperity and success which had come her way. It is one thing to gain children's respect by force and another when they do it spontaneously. It makes all the work done for them worthwhile.

(b) *Her husband* (vv. 28b–29). He was hers before the children came, and from the time of their marriage it had been her aim to serve him personally and in his calling. How well she did this the preceding verses show, but it doesn't necessarily follow that *her husband* will appreciate her. Many wives do their best only to be met with churlishness or worse. So sincere is the gratitude of this one that his words are quoted (v. 29). This begins with RABBOTH, *many*, saying she is not alone in the qualities she displays and the work she does, but others too *do noble things*. This is the same word as in v. 10, so that we now see that, although rare such *women* are not unknown. To her husband she *surpasses them all* and he should know, for he has seen her at close quarters for a long time and would be aware of her faults as well as her virtues. Praise from him is praise indeed.

(c) *God himself* (v. 30). The verse begins with SHEQER, *deceptive*, and ends

with *praised*, bringing out the sharp contrast between external and internal. There is nothing wrong with *charm* of manner or *beauty* of face and form in themselves. They are better than hardness and ugliness! But outward *charm* can cover a foolish character (see on 11:22) and physical *beauty* is too *fleeting* to build a life and its relationships on. We who ‘look on the outward appearance’ may be deceived by them, but ‘the Lord looks on the heart’ and sees our attitude to him. One based on *fear*, that is knowledge, trust and love, is *praised* by him (1 Pet. 3:4f). Moreover, since ‘the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom’ (1:7), it is the source of all the qualities and activities attributed to the ‘noble wife’. So if we ask, ‘How can anyone attain to this standard?’ the answer is through faith in the grace of God.

(d) *Her fellow-citizens* (v. 31). The passage and book end with the twenty-second and last letter of the Hebrew alphabet which begins the word T-NU, *give*. This is what the writer thinks is due to her. *The reward she has earned* is that her fellow-citizens should recognize her by proclaiming and *praising her works* where people gather—at the city gate. If this acrostic poem were publicly known, what encouragement it would be to others!

Although we have followed the verses as they stand in order to keep to the alphabetical order, another approach is to

arrange them under themes, e.g. her approach to marriage (vv. 11–12, 23); her domesticity (vv. 13–15, 19, 21, 27); her business acumen (vv. 16, 24); her charity (v. 20); her care of herself (vv. 17, 22); her character (vv. 25–26); her acclaim (vv. 28–31).

### Question

After working through this passage, which of the approaches listed under verse 10 do you now feel best fits?