

# THE WIFE OF NOBLE CHARACTER IN PROVERBS 31:10-31

*Tom R. Hawkins*

Proverbs 31:10-31, the closing pericope of the Book of Proverbs, beautifully describes and praises a woman who is said to be of "noble character" (NIV). However, interpreters differ on how to understand this passage. Does the description refer to a wife and mother who may have actually lived, or is the passage describing qualities every woman should aspire to attain, or is the "noble wife" a personification of wisdom, or is she the epitome of wisdom?

## THE NOBLE WIFE AS A ROLE MODEL

Proverbs 31:10-31 displays numerous qualities of the noble wife (lyiHa-tw,x), including trustworthiness, resourcefulness, foresight, industriousness, generosity, domestic and business skills, and fear of Yahweh. Her husband's praise at the conclusion of the poem includes his evaluation that she surpassed all her contemporaries, even others who were described as "noble" (lyiHa, v. 29). This means that the main character of the poem is presented in superlative terms regarding her extraordinary character.

While some have elevated her to a type of Christ or the Holy Spirit, von Hoffmann views her as a diligent housewife.<sup>1</sup> He is correct in not ascribing to her any "supernatural" status. However, his limiting her to being only a housewife does not adequately explicate either the immediate passage or its place in the Book of Proverbs. She is at least a "role model" and in fact seems to be more, as will be shown.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Chr. R. von Hofmann, *Schriftbeweis* (Nördlingen: C. H. Bed'schen, 1960), 404.

Because the poem begins with a rhetorical question about finding a wife, some argue that the poem was written as a "paradigm for a prospective bride."<sup>2</sup> Crook goes even further and sees it as "a memorandum from a school answering to the needs of young women who will shortly be assuming positions of wealth and importance in their communities."<sup>3</sup> No evidence has been found, however, that such a school ever existed. Whybray takes a third option and says the passage was written from a man's viewpoint and hence is "a handbook for prospective bridegrooms."<sup>4</sup>

Some of these hypotheses rest on or would be strengthened by the assumption that the poem is related in some way to Proverbs 31:1-9. This connection would logically make the woman of this poem the ideal wife sought by Lemuel. It must be admitted, however, that Proverbs 31 gives no indication that Lemuel did seek or was commanded to seek such a wife. Further there is no indication that the אִשָּׁת־חַיִל ("wife of noble character") was a queen or was to become a queen (31:1). Also the husband of Proverbs 31:11, 23, 28 is a nobleman or elder, not a king. In any case it seems clear, as Murphy suggests, that the poem "holds out an ideal which Israelite society held up for the woman herself."<sup>5</sup>

The word חַיִל has a number of shades of meaning, including, among others, physical strength (Num. 24:18), wealth (Job 20:15, perhaps suggesting wealth attained by one's strength or ability), and integrity or strength of character (Gen. 47:6; Exod. 18:21, 25).<sup>6</sup> But what does it convey when used of women in Ruth 3:11; Proverbs 12:4; and 31:10, 29?

The van der Sluises assert that in view of the occurrence of חַיִל in Proverbs 12:4,<sup>7</sup> this word should not "be diluted" by omitting the idea of "strength" just because it is used with the word for "woman" (אִשָּׁת). For example they argue that the only woman

<sup>2</sup> R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 86.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret B. Crook, "The Marriageable Maiden of Provo 61:10-31," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 13 (1954): 140.

<sup>4</sup> R. N. Whybray, *Book of Proverbs*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 1972), 184.

<sup>5</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, Forms of Old Testament Literature, ed. Rolf Kneirim and Gene M. Tucker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 82.

<sup>6</sup> For an examination of this and other shades of meaning or this often-used word in the Old Testament see Tom R. Hawkins, "The Meaning and Function of Proverbs 31:10-31 in the Book of Proverbs" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 62-76.

<sup>7</sup> "An excellent wife [אִשָּׁת־חַיִל] is the crown of her husband but she who shames him is as rotteness in his bones."

outside Proverbs of whom the word **לִיָּהּ** is used is Ruth (Ruth 3:11), whom Boaz acknowledged as "a woman of strength who knew how to achieve the object she pursued. She is a woman who purposefully, forcefully knew how to shape the circumstances to suit her needs."<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore they claim that the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is viewed in her role "as a woman of strength, a woman with might; and somewhat of that strong, self-assured and purposeful I action sounds throughout the whole song."<sup>9</sup> They see this impression confirmed by others mentioned in the poem, such as her husband and children, who focus on her. She is the one whose actions are characterized by such words as "rewards, searches, brings, makes, arises, gives, thinks, takes, plants, girds, strengthens, tastes, stretches out, understands, spreads out, is not afraid, makes, sells, gives, opens, considers, eats, excels."<sup>10</sup> They find additional evidence of her strength in the descriptions in verses 17 and 19-20, all of which radiate "strength" and "self-assurance" and indicate an almost "aggressive" approach to life.<sup>11</sup> While the meaning of **לִיָּהּ** is broader than "strength" alone, the point is well taken that physical strength and strength of character are both evident in the poem and should not be omitted from an understanding of the **אִשָּׁת־הַיָּהוָה**.

The strength of her character and her capabilities are in fact the opposite of the woman lacking in character who is a problem to her husband (Prov. 12:4b). Instead the **אִשָּׁת־הַיָּהוָה** is a woman "who is capable of managing a fortune."<sup>12</sup> McCreesh notes, "She appears to be completely self-sufficient, rather wealthy, and also spends herself and her resources totally for others."<sup>13</sup> Camp says this woman and Eve in Genesis "provide literary models for women idealized, as creative, authoritative individuals, very much in league with men for the well-being of the world in which they lived (though not, primarily, for its perpetuation through reproduction), but not defined by or dependent on them."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Hanneke van der Sluis-van der Kors and Douwe van der Sluis. "De deugdelijke huisvrouw in opspraak: een interpretatie van spreuken 31: 10-31," *Schrift* 69 (1980): 94.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas P. McCreesh, "Wisdom as ire: Proverbs 31:10-31," *Revue Biblique* 92 (1985): 28.

<sup>14</sup> Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985), 83.

## The Wife of Noble Character in Proverbs 31:10-31 15

While the woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 is depicted as having a certain degree of financial security, every attribute of character mentioned in the poem can be true of those without the wealth she seemingly enjoys. Character traits such as trustworthiness (v. 11), industriousness (vv. 11, 13, 15, 17-20, 24, 27), wise speech (v. 26a), and faithful instruction (v. 26b) all rise out of her "fear of Yahweh" (v. 30) and are not related to economic means. In fact neither the possession of great wealth nor the lack of it excludes one from emulating the qualities of this outstanding woman.

All the favorable feminine imagery in the Book of Proverbs reaches a climax in the final poem. The noble woman is the summation of all that has been said about the good woman or wife. She is the ultimate role model after whom any woman in any era or culture can pattern her life if she desires to live according to the principles of wisdom and the fear of Yahweh.

### THE NOBLE WIFE AS THE EPITOME OF WISDOM

As the climactic culmination of the good woman/wife motif portrayed throughout the Book of Proverbs, how is the אִשָּׁת־חַיִל of 31:10-31 related to the theme of wisdom? More specifically, as the main character of the final poem in Proverbs, which forms an inclusio with Proverbs 1-9, is she related in any way to the figure of Lady Wisdom in those opening chapters?

Hermanson maintains that the author of Proverbs is teaching wisdom through the entire book by contrasting two kinds of people under the figure of the wise and the foolish woman. He sees the woman of folly as the unfaithful wife and the noble wife in 31:10-31 as the faithful one. Hermanson identifies the skillful woman with wisdom and the unfaithful wife with folly.<sup>15</sup> These two figures in Proverbs 1-9 become "representative examples of wisdom and folly through implied comparison." In his view 31:10-31 becomes the climactic personification of wisdom.<sup>16</sup>

Hermanson argues that since 31:10-31 is never referred to as a pattern for the New Testament role of woman or, wife, the early church "did not see its value for women" and did not believe the passage is primarily pointing out qualities a woman should have.<sup>17</sup> But this argument from silence overlooks the obviously feminine qualities referred to in the passage, such as the three references to the woman's husband. While the noble woman may

<sup>15</sup> Hermanson called her a "prostitute," but the better term is "adulteress" (Michael R. Hermanson, "The Personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 31:10-31" [Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1983],40).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 44.

not necessarily have referred to a specific (unnamed) individual, the passage, as already suggested, does seem to depict a typical industrious and noble woman. Although the cumulative effect of all the activities of this industrious woman may seem overwhelming, what is said of her could be true of a particular individual. What she is represented as doing is possible for an actual woman of the first millennium B.C. In this sense her existence is historically plausible.

Numerous verbal repetitions describe both Lady Wisdom in chapters 1-9 and the noble wife of the final poem, thus suggesting, as some argue, that 31:10-311 depicts a personification of wisdom. One such parallel relates to the value of "finding" both wisdom and the noble woman. Proverbs 8:35 reads, concerning Lady Wisdom, "for he who finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord." Likewise 31:10 asks the rhetorical question about who can find this "wife of noble character," whose value is "far above jewels." Proverbs 3:15 and 8:11 describe the value of wisdom as also being "more precious than jewels."<sup>18</sup> Thus the search for wisdom and for the noble wife, are both worth the time and effort.

Other possible parallels are found in wisdom's bringing favor and a good name to those who embrace her (3:4) Just as the noble wife brings good to her husband all the days of her life (31:12), enabling him to enjoy respect among the elders in "the gates" of the city (31:23).<sup>19</sup> Wisdom brings a profitable yield (3:14; 8:19) while the noble wife too sees that her trading is profitable (31:18). Wisdom and the noble woman both have maids (9:3; 31:15) who do their bidding. Furthermore their character each earns a well-deserved reward. Wisdom's "reward" to those who "embrace" her is better than fine gold or choice silver (8:19). Likewise, though in a slightly different sense, the noble wife is "rewarded" by praise from her children, husband, and the entire community (31:31). Wisdom and the noble wife are also both found at the city gates. Wisdom calls there for followers to come after her (1:21; 8:3) while the noble wife there receives well-earned praise for all her works (31:31). The speech of the noble woman is also filled with "wisdom" and "faithful" instruction (31:26), which loosely echo the character of Lady Wisdom seen in 8:11-12 and 9:6. Finally, wisdom is inseparable from the "fear of Yahweh" (8:13). In fact the "fear of Yahweh" is said to be the beginning of wisdom (9:10), and yet in a reciprocal manner wisdom enables those who embrace her to understand the "fear of Yahweh" (2:5).

<sup>18</sup> Job 28:18 uses the same word in describing the price of wisdom.

<sup>19</sup> Proverbs 31:23 says that one of the "good" things he enjoys is respect in "the gates."

In the climax of the poem that concludes the book the basis of all the noble woman's character traits and works of her hands for which she is praised is her "fear of Yahweh" (31:30).<sup>20</sup>

McCreesh sees these parallels as supporting the idea that the woman of 31:10-31 is a personification of wisdom.

Do not the two portraits complement one another? The portrait of Wisdom inviting those who heed her call to make their home with her in chapter 9 is completed by the portrait of the woman settled down with her own in chapter 31. And the security and peace promised by Wisdom in 1:33 is amply portrayed in 31:10-31. If the portrait in chapter 9 is that of Wisdom searching for companions, the portrait of chapter 31 must symbolize Wisdom finally settled down with her own.<sup>21</sup>

The picture given in 31:10-31, according to McCreesh, provides support for his view that because wisdoms personified in chapters 1-9 and the noble wife in chapter 31 is described in similar terms, she also is the personification of wisdom.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, though verbal and other similarities between these two outstanding female figures appear at opposite ends of the book, rather profound differences do exist. While Lady Wisdom is never clearly pictured as a wife or a mother in Proverbs 1-9, the noble woman is obviously both. Her role as a mother, though not strongly emphasized, is reflected in 31:28.<sup>23</sup>

The figure of Lady Wisdom seems to be something of a composite, that is, she seems to be presented as a preacher (feminine) in 1:20-23, a prophet (feminine) in 1:24-33, and a teacher (also feminine) in 8:4-11. She is also said to be seeking followers in 9:3-6 (and perhaps by implication in 1:21 and 8:3-11, 17), whereas the Proverbs 31 woman is too busy in her productivity to seek after followers. She sews (vv. 13, 19, 22), cooks (v. 15), gets up before daylight (v. 15), provides food for her family (v. 15), buys fields (v. 16), plants vineyards (vv. 16-17), engages in trading (v. 18), shares goods with the poor (v. 20), clothes her family in the finest of warm clothing (v. 21), makes retail goods and turns a profit (v. 24). She "provides for the various needs of her husband, children, and servants" (vv. 15, 21, 27).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Most of these suggestions on the comparison of Lady Wisdom and the אִשְׁת־חַיִל are found in McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife," 41-43.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 30. It could be questioned, however, that his phrase "make their home with her in chapter 9" is an accurate portrayal of her invitation to a meal.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>23</sup> In addition several verses could be viewed as allusions to her activities as a mother (vv. 15, 21, 27).

<sup>24</sup> Roy B. Zuck, "A Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 237.

Zuck points out that Since the noble wife "speaks" with wisdom (v. 26), it makes no sense to equate Lady Wisdom with her and thus have "Wisdom speaking with wisdom." It therefore seems better to see the Proverbs 31 noble woman as a "*wise*" woman, not wisdom personified.<sup>25</sup> This finds further support, according to Zuck, in verse 30. As 1:7 and 9:10 have made clear the fear of the Lord is the foundational essence of wisdom. The noble woman, then, as one who fears the Lord, is most certainly a wise woman. She represents the epitome of all that Lady Wisdom teaches.

She is a model or example of a wise woman. In contrast to a foolish, adulterous woman (2: 6-19; 5:20; 6:23-34; 7:4-27) this woman is faithful to her family and is therefore praised (31:30-31) by her children and her husband (v. 28) and the public (v. 31). As a wise woman, she is in contrast to "woman Folly" (9:13-18): Rather than a personification of wisdom, the woman in 31:10-31 IS an embodiment or model of wisdom, woman who is wise because she is living skillfully.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than limiting the woman in 31:10-31 to simply a personification of wisdom, Garrett, Ringgren, and Wolters see her as both personification and the presentation of an ideal woman.<sup>27</sup> She is "wisdom in action" and "her deeds are the practical and concrete incarnation of what 't means to be wise."<sup>28</sup> The advantage of this view is that it see the obvious references to both wisdom and the womanly role model. Only in this way is it possible to do "justice to the everyday and down-to-earth character of the Valiant Woman's mighty deeds as manager of a large estate."<sup>29</sup>

Manifesting many of the traits of wisdom, the אִשָּׁת־חַיִל is similar in many ways to Lady Wisdom. The latter, however, is depicted much more as a figure through whom the concept of wisdom can be vocalized while the Woman in Proverbs 31 is clearly a woman doing what women do, though admittedly idealized. Her activities in real life represent concrete applications of the wisdom that Lady Wisdom personifies.

One of the questions faced by the writer or final editor of Proverbs was how best to impress indelibly on his readers a poetic;

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. (italics his).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 237-38.

<sup>27</sup> Duane A. Garrett Proverbs, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 249; Helmer Ringgren, Artur Weiser, and Walther Zimmerli, *Sprüche, Prediger, Das Hohe Lied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Esther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 121; and AI Wolters, "Sopîyyâ (Prov 31:27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on *Sophia*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 581.

<sup>28</sup> Wolters, "Sopîyyâ (Prov 31:27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on *Sophia*," 581.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 581-82.

ideal of wisdom. It is nothing short of a brilliant stroke to delay his most convincing portrait of how to live wisely until the very end of the book. He then pulled together the major themes and motifs about women and concretized the concept of wisdom into a final, summarizing statement by giving a word picture of a woman who embodies the essence of what it means to live wisely. Though she represents wisdom in a female form, the character traits she demonstrates serve as examples to both men and women. Neither wisdom nor folly is limited to a single gender.

### THE APPLICATION OF PROVERBS 31:10-31 TO TODAY

Throughout the Book of Proverbs women are neither ignored nor treated as inferior to men; in fact the climactic conclusion found in 31:10-31 elevates womanhood to a position of supreme honor. The status accorded the **אִשָּׁת־חַיִל** in this passage was not granted because of birth or riches but was earned through industrious productivity and diligent application of the principles of wisdom based on the fear of Yahweh.

The noble woman presents an image of superior achievement in every area of life. In an era in which industry is discouraged by emphasis on rights over responsibilities, get-rich-quick schemes, and preoccupation with goods acquired on credit, the **אִשָּׁת־חַיִל** models an industrious and productive lifestyle that contributes to the prosperity of the home and of society at large. In keeping with descriptions throughout the Book of Proverbs, this culminating picture reinforces the thought that anyone whose character, commitment, godliness, and productivity replicate the qualities of this woman has learned to live wisely.

Following the rhetorical question "who can find?" the poem describes the noble woman as gaining the full confidence of her husband. Such a relationship of trust is possible in a marriage in which each mate loves the other in a way that consistently benefits the other person. While 31: 11-12 focuses on the trustworthiness of the wife, the husband has a similar responsibility to seek to develop the character qualities described in this acrostic poem.

The poem effectively portrays that the noble wife had a strong work ethic and willingly carried her share of the household's work. Although she was privileged to have servants, she did not use them as an opportunity for laziness. She remained in complete oversight of all activities in her household (v. 27), even rising before dawn to involve herself personally in the allotting of food for the day (v. 15). She did not seem to allow for an idle moment. The help of her servants enabled her to expand her horizons and spread her energies further afield in providing for the needs

of her household. She did not look for an easy way out but instead did what was necessary to ensure that her activities manifested the best quality, whether in the food she secured for the table (v. 14), the clothing she made herself and her family (vv. 21-22), or the garments she sold to the merchants (v. 24).

Her priorities were thus devoted to the good of her husband and her household. She also sought to help the needs of the poor in her community (v. 20). In addition she ran a profitable home-based business (vv. 17-18), selling garments she made to increase the income of the household (v. 24). She knew how to operate in the business world, selecting raw materials (v. 13), investing in property that would yield a profitable return, and selling finished products (vv. 16, 24).

Collins calls her a "capable wife" whose character makes her "no mere homebody but an efficient businesswoman" as well. He correctly insists that if this passage teaches anything about the role of women, "it is that they can exercise responsibility quite as widely and efficiently as their male counterparts."<sup>30</sup>

Such industrious productivity on the part of the אִשָּׁת־חַיִל reaped many benefits for her husband, her family, and herself. They all were able to enjoy quality provisions (v. 21) as well as financial and emotional security concerning whatever the future might bring (vv. 21, 25). With his wife providing such apt leadership over the affairs of the household, her husband was able to direct his energies toward the leadership needs of the community, where he too was well respected (v. 23). Obviously both members of this couple were committed to deep-seated character qualities enabling them to excel in their individual areas. In addition to the wife's unfailing devotion to the needs of her husband and family and generosity to the poor, the poem specifically mentions the kindness and wisdom with which she spoke (v. 26). The foundation from which these qualities arise is given in the grand climax of the pericope as her "fear of Yahweh" (v. 30). The end result is that this woman and her works are praised by all whom her life touches: her children, her husband (vv. 28-29), and her community (v. 31).

In spite of the great beauty of this portrayal of the ideal woman and the honor given her, this passage is nevertheless often viewed by modern women as a harsh yardstick by which to measure their shortcomings. Many cringe at the mere mention of this woman. Therefore it is important to put into perspective certain aspects of the poem's message.

<sup>30</sup> John J. Collins, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Knox Preaching Guides* (Atlanta: Knox, 1980), 69-70.

First, no young bride can possibly fulfill all that is pictured in this poem before developing the maturity that comes only with time. This portrait looks at the finished product, not at a young woman entering marriage. It reflects the cumulative effect of a life lived wisely. At any given point in life a person can only seek to move in the direction this superb and energetic woman has laid out for all to follow. She serves as a kind of pictorial mentor of the "ultimate" wife just as the qualities listed for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 describe the direction and focus a man's life should take if he aspires to be a church leader.

A second area in which perspective is needed is in seeing the complementary roles of the husband and wife. At first glance it might be easy to conclude from this passage that the woman is the dominant figure who is the major provider for the family. What must be remembered is that the purpose of the poem is to focus on the role of the wife, not that of the husband. The portrayal of this woman is in no way inconsistent with the New Testament principle of the husband being the head of the wife (Eph. 5:23). If the husband's role and daily activities were depicted to the same extent as the wife's in this poem, she could still be seen as fitting under his leadership and loving authority.

In an age when women often tend to feel demeaned, Proverbs 31:10-31 provides a liberating concept of marriage with both husband and wife making a valuable contribution to the family. The poem presents a picture in which the אִשָּׁה־נָאִלָּה is no slave to her husband but has ample opportunities to develop her own potential. She is involved in the textile industry, agriculture, real estate, and household management while her husband takes a place in what might be called "politics" in the modern era. Their lives are not lived totally separate, however. They are partners in marriage. Modern couples could benefit by a careful examination of the interaction between spouses suggested in this acrostic poem.

Like some recurring refrain in a musical masterpiece, in the midst of this paean the ideal woman's husband is mentioned directly or by implication five times. She is said to be his most precious possession: "If you can find a truly good wife, she is worth more than precious gems" (Provo 31:10). She interacts with him by supplying his needs and giving him grounds for trusting her. ... (Prov. 31:11). She efficiently cares for and establishes a good relationship with their children: "Her children stand up and bless her" (Provo 31:28). Then he realizes what her needs are and gives her his unstinted praise: "There are many fine women in the world but you are the best of them all" (Provo 31:29).<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Robina Drakeford and John W. Drakeford, *In Praise of Women: A Christian Approach to Love, Marriage and Equality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 26.

Third, while the woman of noble character is seen as expanding her horizons beyond her home, all her outside business endeavors are focused on meeting the needs of her family, and her generating extra income is carried on from a home base.

In a modern society that has tried to declare marriage and the family useless relics of bygone days tied to irrelevant customs, Proverbs 31:10-31 stands like a literary Statue of Liberty welcoming all who have tried the sociological jargon about loose commitment and easy divorce and found it wanting. By contrast, the אִשָּׁת־חַיִל models faithfulness to her marriage vows and the family unit. Her commitment to purity of life and morals contrasts with the loose living of the adulteress and the prostitute. As a role model for the modern age, the Proverbs 31 woman is "liberated" in the good sense of that word and is a model of the kind of person, man or woman, whose character forms the foundation stone of any healthy society.

Just as Proverbs 9 brings together the matter of choice before each person in regard to Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly, so the final picture of the אִשָּׁת־חַיִל as the epitome of wisdom presents a personal choice for readers to become actively involved in determining the direction of their lives, seeking a quality of life that is positive, uplifting, and beneficial rather than drifting through life as a spectator. To be equipped for the demands of normal life (31:21), as well as the uncertainties of the future (v. 25) every person, male and female, needs wisdom. The qualities wisdom imparts benefit all mankind. It is a tragedy that so many have stumbled through life, despising those attributes or being unwilling to pay the price to obtain them.

The אִשָּׁת־חַיִל is a concrete word picture of all that it means to live wisely. She exemplifies wisdom in her life by her proper alignment of values. She does not follow the world's standards of feminine achievement focused on physical beauty and womanly charm. Instead she has chosen to anchor her life on the "fear of Yahweh" (v. 30), the true basis of all wisdom. One cannot embrace true wisdom without entering into a personal relationship with God.

With this as her foundation the noble wife further demonstrates wisdom in ordering other priorities in her life. Her marriage vows are not taken lightly, but she consistently and diligently applies herself to meeting the needs of her husband and her household in the best way possible. Her genuine concern for others does not end with her family, however, as she also reaches out, in generosity to the poor (v. 20) and speaks with kindness (v. 26), indicating the value she places on human life and relationships.

Her disciplined, industrious lifestyle shows foresight, effi-

ciency, and resourcefulness, all evidences of the application of wisdom in her life. She has prepared for the worst of winter weather and other unforeseen contingencies (Vv. 21, 25). She uses her time wisely, and she diligently oversees her household affairs in an orderly manner (v. 27). She demonstrates business acumen and makes wise decisions (vv. 16, 18). Wisdom has become so much a part of her life that it is naturally expressed in her speech (v. 26).

Lady Wisdom in chapters 1-9, and the wife of noble character as the epitome of wisdom, in Proverbs 31:10-31, are looking for followers in any age or society. They are female mentors to be held up to all young women and men as worthy of emulation. In a society that honors and highly pays sports and entertainment figures, a tremendous need exists to hold up a new kind of model. This noble woman demonstrates that a proper spiritual orientation and the arrangement of one's life under the "fear of the Lord" is the only way to reach one's "full potential" as wise created beings made to live free of slavery and yet under divine authority.

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Proverbs 31:10-31. Epilogue: The Wife of Noble Character. 10b A wife of noble character who can find?d. She is worth far more than rubies. 11 Her husband has full confidence in her.Â but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. 31 Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate. Read more.