

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

The words and prophecy of King Lemuel, and what his mother taught him, Proverbs 31:1, Proverbs 31:2. Debauchery and much wine to be avoided, Proverbs 31:3-7. How kings should administer justice, Proverbs 31:8, Proverbs 31:9. The praise of a virtuous woman and good housewife, in her economy, prudence, watchfulness, and assiduity in labor, vv. 10-29. Frailty of beauty, Proverbs 31:30, Proverbs 31:31.

Verse 1

The words of King Lemuel - $\text{dibrey lemuel melech}$, $\text{The words to Muel the king}$. So the Syriac; and so I think it should be read, the lamed being the article or preposition.

But who is Muel or Lemuel? Solomon, according to general opinion; and the mother here mentioned, Bath-sheba. I cannot receive these sayings; for

1. Whoever this was, he appears to have been the first-born of his mother: called here emphatically bar bitni , the son of my womb; which is not likely to be true of Solomon, as his mother had been the wife of Uriah, and possibly had borne that rough and faithful soldier some children.

2. It is intimated here that this son had come by a lawful marriage: hence bar nedarai , the son of my vow, her matrimonial covenant; for so it is most natural to understand the words. But is there any proper sense in which we can say that this was correct in reference to David, Bath-sheba and Solomon? For although the son born in adultery died, it is by no means likely that Bath-sheba made any particular vows relative to Solomon; for of her piety, so much vaunted of by some writers, we yet want the proofs.

But, however this may be, there is no evidence whatever that Muel or Lemuel means Solomon; the chapter seems, to be much later than his time, and the several Chaldaisms which occur in the very opening of it are no mean proof of this. If Agur was not the author of it, it may be considered as another supplement to the book of Proverbs. Most certainly Solomon did not write it.

The prophecy that his mother taught him - massa may here signify the oracle; the subject that came by Divine inspiration; see on Proverbs 30:1 (note). From this and some other circumstances it is probable that both these chapters were written by the same author. Houbigant thinks that Massa here is the name of a place; and, therefore, translates, $\text{The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, with which his mother instructed him}$.

Verse 2

What, my son? - The Chaldee bar is used twice in this verse, instead of the Hebrew ben , son. This verse is very elliptical; and commentators, according to their different tastes, have inserted words, indeed some of them a whole sentence, to make up the sense. Perhaps Coverdale has hit the sense as nearly as any other: $\text{These are the wordes of Kynge Lemuel; and the lesson that his mother taughte him. My sonne, thou son of my body, O my deare beloved sonne!}$

The son of my vows? - A child born after vows made for offsprings is called the child of a person's vows.

Verse 3

Give not thy strength - Do not waste thy substance on women.

In such intercourse the strength of body, soul and substance is destroyed.

Such connections are those which destroy kings, melachin , the Chaldee termination instead of the Hebrew.

Verse 4

It is not for kings - to drink wine - An intemperate man is ill fit to hold the reins of government.

Verse 5

Lest they drink, and forget the law - When they should be administering justice, they are found incapable of it; or, if they go into the judgment-seat, may pervert justice.

Verse 6

Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish - We have already seen, that inebriating drinks were mercifully given to condemned criminals, to render them less sensible of the torture they endured in dying. This is what was offered to our Lord; but he refused it. See note on Psalm 104:15.

Verse 8

Open thy mouth for the dumb - For such accused persons as have no counsellors, and cannot plead for themselves.

Are appointed to destruction - $\text{אֲנָשִׁים בְּנֵי דֶלֶת}$ (beney chaloph), variously translated, children of passage - indigent travelers; children of desolation - those who have no possessions, or orphans. I believe it either signifies those who are strangers, and are travelling from place to place, or those who are ready to perish in consequence of want or oppression.

Verse 10

Who can find a virtuous woman? - This and the following verses are acrostic, each beginning with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet: Proverbs 31:10, א (aleph); Proverbs 31:11, ב (beth); Proverbs 31:12, ג (gimel); and so on to the end of the chapter, the last verse of which has the letter ט (tau). From this to the end of the chapter we have the character of a woman of genuine worth laid down; first, in general, Proverbs 31:10-12; secondly, in its particular or component parts, verses 13-29; and, thirdly, the summing up of the character, Proverbs 31:30, Proverbs 31:31.

I. Her general character.

1. She is a virtuous woman - a woman of power and strength. $\text{אִשָּׁה כֹּחַ אֲדָמָה}$ (esheth chayil), a strong or virtuous wife, full of mental energy.
2. She is invaluable; her price is far above rubies - no quantity of precious stones can be equal to her worth.

Verse 11

The heart of her husband -

3. She is an unspotted wife. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her - he knows she will take care that a proper provision is made for his household, and will not waste any thing. He has no need for spoil - he is not obliged to go out on predatory excursions, to provide for his family, at the expense of the neighboring tribes.

Verse 12

She will do him good -

4. She has her husband's happiness in view constantly. She recompenses all his kindness to her in beneficent acts. For kind words she returns kind deeds.

1. Her good is unmixed; she will do him good. and not evil.

2. Her good is not capricious; it is constant and permanent, while she and her husband live. His heart safely trusts in her, for she will do him good all the days of her life. This is her general character.

Verse 13

She seeketh wood and flax, and worketh willingly, etc. -

II. This is the second part of her character, giving the particulars of which it is composed.

1. She did not buy ready woven cloth: she procured the raw material, if wool, most probably from her own flocks; if flax, most probably from her own fields.
2. Here she manufactured; for she worketh willingly with her hands. And all her labor is a cheerful service; her will, her heart, is in it.

It needs no arguments to prove that women, even of the highest ranks, among the Greeks, Romans, and Israelites, worked with their hands at every kind of occupation necessary for the support of the family. This kind of employment was not peculiar to the virtuous woman in the text.

Verse 14

She is like the merchants' ships -

3. She acts like merchants. If she buy any thing for her household, she sells sufficient of her own manufactures to pay for it; if she imports, she exports: and she sends articles of her own manufacturing or produce to distant countries; she traffics with the neighboring tribes.

Verse 15

She riseth also while it is yet night -

4. She is an economist of time; and when the nights are long, and the days short, her family not only spend a part of the evening after sunset in domestic labor, but they all arise before daylight, and prepare the day's food, that they may not have their labor interrupted. To those who are going to the fields, and to the flocks, she gives the food necessary for the day: אֶת־לֶחֶם־הַיּוֹם (teref), prey, a term taken from hunting, the object of which was,

the supplying their natural wants: hence applied to daily food. See notes on Proverbs 30:8. And to the women who are to be employed within she gives \times — $\times\text{\$}$ (chok), the task - the kind of work they are to do, the materials out of which they are to form it, and the quantity she expects from each. Thus all the servants are settled: their food, work, and tasks appointed. Every thing is done orderly.

Verse 16

She considereth a field and buyeth it -

5. She provides for the growing wants of her family. More land will shortly be needed, for the family is growing up; and having seen a field contiguous to her own, which was on sale, she estimates its worth, and purchases it a good bargain; and she pays for it by the fruit of her own industry.

6. She does not restrict herself to the bare necessities of life; she is able to procure some of its comforts. She plants a vineyard, that she may have wine for a beverage, for medicine, and for sacrifice. This also is procured of her own labor. Whatever goes out brings its worth in; and barter, not buying, is her chief mode of traffic.

Verse 17

She girdeth her loins with strength -

7. She takes care of her own health and strength, not only by means of useful labor, but by healthy exercise. She avoids what might enervate her body, or soften her mind - she is ever active, and girt ready for every necessary exercise. Her loins are firm, and her arms strong.

Verse 18

She perceiveth that her merchandise is good -

8. She takes care to manufacture the best articles of the kind, and to lay on a reasonable price that she may secure a ready sale. Her goods are in high repute, and she knows she can sell as much as she can make. And she finds that while she pleases her customers, she increases her own profits.

9. She is watchful and careful. Her candle - her lamp, burns all night, which is of great advantage in case of sudden alarms; and in the times and places where there were so many banditti, this was a very necessary family regulation. Perhaps some works were carried on during the night, those employed sleeping in the daytime. Thus labor never stood still; whilst some slept, others worked. This was no unusual thing in ancient times; and it prevails now; but alas! little children are often thus employed to help to support their indigent parents, and to fill the coffers of their unfeeling taskmasters.

Verse 19

She layeth her hands to the spindle -

10. She gives an example of skill and industry to her household. She takes the distaff, that on which the wool or flax was rolled; and the spindle, that by twisting of which she twisted the thread with the right hand, while she held the distaff in the guard of the left arm, and drew down the thread with the fingers of the left hand. Allowing that spindle and distaff are proper translations of $\times\text{\textcircled{X}}\text{TM}\times\text{\textcircled{X}}\text{TM}\times$ (kishor), and $\times\text{TM}\times\text{TM}\times\text{TM}\times$ (pelech), this was their use, and the way in which they were used. The spindle and distaff are the most ancient of all the instruments used for spinning, or making thread. The spinning-wheel superseded them in these countries; but still they were in considerable use till spinning machinery superseded both them and the spinning-wheels in general.

Verse 20

She stretcheth out her hand to the poor -

11. She is truly charitable. She knows that in every portion of a man's gain God requires a lot for the poor; and if this is not given, God's blessing is not in the rest. And she is not contented to give common alms. While with one hand ($\times\text{TM}\times$ (yad)) she relieves the general poor, with both hands ($\times\text{TM}\times\text{TM}\times$ (yadeyha)) she gives to the needy, $\times\text{TM}\times\text{TM}\times$ (leaney), to the afflicted poor.

Verse 21

She is not afraid of the snow -

12. She is not anxious relative to the health and comfort of her family in the winter season, having provided clothes sufficient for each in the cold weather, in addition to those which they wore in the warm season.

For all her household are clothed with scarlet - Not scarlet, for the color can avail nothing in keeping off the cold; nor would it be a proper color for the bogs and dirt of winter. But $\times\text{\textcircled{X}}\text{TM}\times$ (shanim), from $\times\text{\textcircled{X}}\text{TM}\times$ (shanah), to iterate, to double, signifies not only scarlet, so called from being twice or doubly dyed, but also double garments, not only the ordinary coat but the surtout or great-coat also, or a cloak to cover all. But most probably double garments, or twofold to what they were accustomed to wear, are here intended. If the general clothing be intended, scarlet cannot be the meaning, nor did our translators entirely rely on it; and therefore put double garments, the true meaning, in the margin, from which it cannot be too speedily transferred to the text.

The Vulgate has "æduplicibus." And my old MS. very properly, Alle forsoth hir hoomli men, ben clothid with double. And Coverdale, with equal propriety, "For all hir householde folkes are duble clothed." But if her husband and children alone are referred to, scarlet, which in the general meaning of the term, may be proper enough; as even in these countries of ours, scarlet, as being a lively bright color, is used in the winter dresses.

Verse 22

She maketh herself coverings of tapestry -

13. She is not regardless either of her own person, or of the decent, proper appearance of her presses and wardrobe. She has coverings or carpeting for her guests to sit upon; she has also tapestry, x̄x̄'x̄"x̄TMx̄ (marbaddim), either tapestry, carpeting, or quilted work for her beds; and her own clothing is x©x© (shesh), fine flax, or linen cloth, and purple; probably for a cloak or mantle. The fine linen or cotton cloth of Egypt is probably intended. I have often seen it wrapping the bodies of mummies; it is something like our coarse calico. The purple was supposed to have been dyed by a precious liquor obtained from the pinna magna, a large shellfish, of the muscle kind, found on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. I have seen some of them nearly two feet in length. But it is a doubt whether any such liquor was ever obtained from this or any other fish; and the story itself is invented merely to hide the secret, the proper method of dying purple; which was kept so well that it certainly died with the ancients.

Verse 23

Her husband is known in the gates -

14. She is a loving wife, and feels for the respectability and honor of her husband. He is an elder among his people, and he sits as a magistrate in the gate. He is respected not only on account of the neatness and cleanliness of his person and dress, but because he is the husband of a woman who is justly held in universal esteem. And her complete management of household affairs gives him full leisure to devote himself to the civil interests of the community.

Verse 24

She maketh fine linen, and selleth it -

15. She is here remarkable for carrying on a traffic of splendid and ornamental dresses, or habits, as she is, Proverbs 31:13, for a coarser manufacture, The $\text{x}\text{ix}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{b}}\text{x}^{\text{c}}\text{y}^{\text{d}}$ (sidon) is supposed to come from the Arabic; and to signify a kind of loose inner garment, shirt, chemise, or fine muslin covering. Some of these are so exceedingly fine, like the abroam, that when spread on the grass, they are scarcely discernible. Some such garments as these are still worn by ladies in India and in China, and are so thin and transparent, that every part of the body may be seen through them. I have many representations of persons clothed in this way before me both of the Chinese, the Hindoo, and the Malabar ladies. Probably this eminent Jewish matron had such articles manufactured in her own house. She dealt also in girdles. These are still a very general and very expensive article of dress. I have seen them made of silk, and highly ornamented with gold and silver thread, worked into flowers and various curious devices. The loose Eastern robe is confined by these; and the word may also take in the shawl of the turban, which is often superb and costly. It is properly the girdle for the head. As these were generally woven, the consumption was great; and an able artist must have had a good trade.

The Arabic gives a remarkable translation of this verse: â€œShe maketh towels, (or tablecloths), and sells them to the inhabitants of Basra, (a city in Mesopotamia), and fine linens, and sells them to the Canaanites.â€ My old MS. Bible has, Sandel sche made and sold, and a litil girdil sche toke to Chanane. Perhaps xœx>x xçx xTM (lakkenaani), for the merchant, may stand here for xœx>x xçx xTMxœ (lakkenaanim), the Canaanites.

Verse 26

Strength and honor are her clothing -

16. All the articles manufactured by herself or under her care have a double perfection:

- 1.They are strong.
- 2.They are elegant;

Strength and honor are her clothing; and on account of this she shall rejoice in time to come; she shall never have occasion to blush for any thing she has made, for any thing she or hers have worn, or for any thing she has sold. Besides, she has so conducted herself that she has reason to expect that the hand of the Lord shall be still with her, and shall keep her from evil that it may not grieve her.

Verse 26

She openeth her mouth with wisdom -

17. He comes now to the moral management of her family.

which the inside murmurs; and which, because not ingenuous, is a burden to itself.

2. Beauty, חַיִּיפִי (haiyophi), elegance of shape, symmetry of features, dignity of mien, and beauty of countenance, are all חֶבֶל (hebel), vanity; sickness impairs them, suffering deranges them, and death destroys them.

3. “But a woman that feareth the Lord, that possesses true religion, has that grace that harmonizes the soul, that purifies and refines all the tempers and passions, and that ornament of beauty, a meek and quiet mind, which in the sight of God is of great price: -

She shall be praised - This is the lasting grace, the unfading beauty.

Verse 31

Give her of the fruit of her hands - This may be a prayer. May she long enjoy the fruit of her labors! May she see her children’s children, and peace upon Israel!

And let her own works praise her in the gates - Let what she has done be spoken of for a memorial of her; let her bright example be held forth in the most public places. Let it be set before the eyes of every female, particularly of every wife, and especially of every mother; and let them learn from this exemplar, what men have a right to expect in their wives, the mistresses of their families, and the mothers of their children. Amen.