

Reflecting God's Character at Work

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Proverbs

A remarkable connection between the book of Proverbs and the world of work occurs at the end of the book. Lady Wisdom reappears in street clothes in the final 22 verses of the book of Proverbs as a living, breathing woman, termed “the virtuous woman” in the King James Version. Some translators use “wife” instead of “woman,” and both “wife” and “woman” are possible translations of the Hebrew *ishshah*. But the text focuses on the woman's work as an entrepreneur with workers to manage. Proverbs 31:10-31 does not merely apply to the workplace; it takes place in the workplace.

The book of Proverbs is summarized, then, in a poem praising a woman who is the wise manager of a diverse enterprise ranging from weaving to wine making to trade in the market. To describe the woman's character, translators variously use the words “virtuous” (King James Version), “capable” (New Revised Standard Version), “excellent” (New American Standard Bible), or “of noble character” (New International Version). But these terms fail to capture the element of strength present in the underlying Hebrew word (*chayil*). In a majority of its 246 appearances in the Old Testament, *chayil* applies to fighting men (for example, David's “mighty warriors” in 1 Chronicles 7:2). Translators tend to downplay the element of strength when the word is applied to a woman, as with Ruth, whom

English translations describe as “noble” (in the New International Version and Today’s New International Version), “virtuous” (in the New Revised Standard Version, and the King James Version) or “excellent” (in the New American Standard Bible). But the Hebrew word is the same, whether applied to a man or a woman. In describing the woman of Proverbs, its meaning is best understood as strong or valiant, as further indicated by the description, “She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong” (Proverbs 31:17).

The high importance of this section in the book of Proverbs is signaled in two ways. First, it is in the form of an acrostic poem, meaning that its lines begin with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in order, making it memorable. Second, it is placed at the climax of the entire book, so the poem can be seen as a summary to the book of Proverbs. A wise worker, according to Proverbs, is trustworthy, diligent, shrewd, and generous. She is just, modest, and guards her tongue. The Valiant Woman embodies all these traits.

To some people in the ancient near east, and even to some now, portraying a woman as a model of wise entrepreneurship would be surprising. Despite the fact that God gave the gift of work to men and women equally in Genesis 1 and 2, women’s work has often been denigrated. In the book of Proverbs, God's wisdom is available equally to men and women. The valiant woman functions as an affirmation of the dignity of every person’s work.

As always in the book of Proverbs, the way of wisdom flows out of the fear of the Lord. After all the Valiant Woman's virtues are described, the poem reveals the source of her wisdom in Proverbs 31:20. "A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."