

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 - ܕܒܪܝܢܐܢܐܠܡܘܥܠܡܠܟ (dibreymeluel melech), "The words to Muel the king." So the Syriac; and so I think it should be read, the ܠܡܘܥܠܡܠܟ (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 ܒܪܝܢܐܢܐܠܡܘܥܠܡܠܟ (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 ܒܪܝܢܐܢܐܠܡܘܥܠܡܠܟ (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 - ܡܫܠܐܡܘܥܠܡܠܟ (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, "The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, with which his mother instructed him."

Verse 2

What, my son? - The Chaldee ܒܪܝܢܐܢܐܠܡܘܥܠܡܠܟ (bar) is used twice in this verse, instead of the Hebrew בן (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: "These are the words of King Lemuel; and the lesson that his mother taught him. My son, thou son of my body, O my deare beloved son!"

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, ܡܠܚܝܢܐܠܡܠܟܝܢ (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 - $\text{אֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר יֵצְאוּ מִן הַבַּיִת}$ (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. $\text{אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יִצְרָא$ (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: אֲרֵי לֶחֶם (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 $\times\text{---}\times\text{\$}$ (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 $\times\text{\textcircled{x}}\text{TM}\times$ (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, $\times\text{\textcircled{x}}\text{TM}\times$ (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.

1. She is wise and intelligent; she has not neglected the cultivation of her mind.

2. She is amiable in her carriage, full of good nature, well tempered, and conciliating in her manners and address.

In her tongue is the law of kindness - This is the most distinguishing excellence of this woman. There are very few of those who are called managing women who are not lords over their husbands, tyrants over their servants, and insolent among their neighbors. But this woman, with all her eminence and excellence, was of a meek and quiet spirit. Blessed woman!

Verse 27

She looketh well to the ways of her household -

18. She is a moral manager: she takes care that all shall behave themselves well; that none of them shall keep bad company or contract vicious habits. A religious industry, or an industrious religion, is the law of her house. She can instruct them in religion, as well as she can teach them in their labor. In her house, diligence in business, and fervency of spirit, serving the Lord, go hand in hand.

And eateth not the bread of idleness -

19. She knows that idleness leads to vice; and therefore every one has his work, and every one has his proper food. That they may work well, they are fed well; and every one, at least, earns the bread that he eats - eateth not the bread of idleness.

Verse 28

Her children arise up, and call her blessed -

20. She considers a good education next to Divine influence; and she knows also that if she train up a child in the way he should go, when he is old he will not depart from it.

1. Her children are well bred; they rise up and pay due respect.

2. They are taught the fear of the lord, and obedience to his testimonies; therefore they call her blessed. So they are of a decent, orderly, respectable, religious behavior.

3. Her husband is so satisfied with her conduct towards himself, his household, his business, and their children, that he praiseth her. He shows himself sensible of her excellence, and encourages her, in her work, by the commendations he bestows.

Verse 29

Many daughters have done virtuously - This is undoubtedly the speech of the husband, giving testimony to the excellence of his wife: "Her husband also, and he praiseth her, saying, 'many daughters,' women, 'have done virtuously,' with due propriety as wives, mistresses, and mothers; 'but Thou,' my incomparable wife, 'excellent them all;'" (veath alith al cullanah), but Thou hast ascended above the whole of them - thou hast carried every duty, every virtue, and every qualification and excellency, to a higher perfection, than any of whom we have ever read or heard. And let the reader seriously consider the above particulars, as specified under the different heads and subdivisions; and he will be probably of the same mind. But high as the character of this Jewish matron stands in the preceding description, I can say that I have met at least her equal, in a daughter of the Rev. Dr. Samuel Annesly, the wife of Samuel Wesley, sen., rector of Epworth in Lincolnshire, and mother of the late extraordinary brothers, John and Charles Wesley. I am constrained to add this testimony, after having traced her from her birth to her death, through all the relations that a woman can bear upon earth. Her Christianity gave to her virtues and excellences a heightening, which the Jewish matron could not possess. Besides, she was a woman of great learning and information, and of a depth of mind, and reach of thought, seldom to be found among the daughters of Eve, and not often among the sons of Adam.

Verse 30

Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain, etc. -

III. Here is the summing up of the character.

1. Favour, grace of manner may be deceitful, many a fair appearance of this kind is put on, assumed for certain secular or more unworthy purposes; it is learned by painful drilling in polished seminaries, and, being the effect of mere physical discipline, it continues while the restraint lasts; but it is a sheker, a lie, a mere semblance, an outward varnish. It is not the effect of internal moral regulation; it is an outside, at

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 הֶבֶל (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.