



They Stood (Daughters of Zelophehad),
Lauren Wright Pittman

“A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.”

This text is as polarizing as it is cherished. The woman in these verses is venerated and celebrated as the ideal, the archetype of a wife of noble character. She is typified as the model for which every woman should strive. What are we emulating of this woman who is overworked, tired and honored only for the ways she makes her husband and household look good? And if we do want to be like her, do we need superpowers, like Wonder Woman, to achieve all that the woman in Proverbs 31 achieves?

This woman does not sleep. She rises while it is night (v.15a), works all day and her lamp is not extinguished at night (v.18b). She seeks the best, most

Wonder Woman Real or Myth?

Proverbs 31:10-31

BY ANITA WRIGHT

expensive and exclusive materials for her household, buys property and trades with the merchants. In addition to all of that, this woman is the wife of a wealthy man, owns property and has servants. She probably comes from a wealthy family because when it talks about her price being far greater than rubies, it is probably referring to the bride price (a dowry based on her beauty, social status and other factors).

The Proverbs 31 woman is great, but she didn't accomplish all these things by herself. She would have had help! Also, she was not real.

When placed within the context of the entire chapter, one sees that this text was written to King Lemuel by his mother. Here the Queen Mother reiterates to her son the folly of giving his warrior strength to strange women and strong drink.¹ She

urges him, instead, to be the voice to the voiceless and a righteous defender of those who are poor or in need. The ideal woman for him is a warrior-like woman who matches his abilities and strengths.

The “capable wife” verses (10–31) are the Queen Mother’s list of qualities to look for in a potential wife. It was written as an acrostic poem with each of the 22 lines beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This was a poem describing an ideal woman! This was *not* a description of one woman, nor was it intended to be. This poem is an amalgam of great characteristics taken from *many* women that the writer may have known or observed over the years. Therefore, no single person accomplished all of these things. It took many women to accomplish all of the things that the Queen Mother highlights as traits befitting the royal spouse.

Yet, for years the church has been teaching women to live up to this model of an unattainable, unrealistic (and actually unreal) person! Women have been taught to work hard, day and night, without complaint or caring for themselves. The church has instructed women always to look out for others and always present a strong, confident, but tender version of themselves when doing it.

This idealistic, unsustainable image has been passed down through generations, leading to a legacy of exhaustion and burnout. Dr. Chanequa

Walker-Barnes notes that the trope of the strong woman “forces upon women unrealistic expectations for emotional strength and regulation, caring for others at the expense of one’s own needs, and radical self-sufficiency, which in turn increase stress, role strain, and poor self-care behaviors. Consequently, women face a crisis of physical illness and emotional distress that reached epidemic proportions.”²

The responsible alternative to the traditional preaching of this text is to celebrate the very real *individual* women among us who together embody the same priorities as our Proverbs 31 Wonder Woman. First, like her husband, this woman is attentive to and cares for those in need. This woman is celebrated because she is not slothful or idle, but diligent and caring. Like her husband, she uses her authority to benefit the voiceless within her realm. Finally, this woman is the embodiment of the Wisdom Woman described in Proverbs 1-9³, who instructs others in the ways to live, and advocates for the oppressed. We revere this woman because she embodies the divine feminine, Wisdom.

Set aside the idea of constant care for others and self-neglect. Celebrate the individuals, the missions, the moments of wisdom that allow us to support one another. This reading of the Proverbs 31 Wonder Woman allows all women to identify with the text and dispels the mythological ideal woman.

A Service for the Worship of God

Call to Worship

(based on Exodus 15:1–2, 11, 18, 20b)

One: I will sing to the Lord, for the Holy One has triumphed gloriously.

All: The Lord is my strength and my might. The Holy One has become my salvation.

One: This is my God, and I will praise her, my mother’s God, and I will exalt her.

All: Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?

One: Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

All: The Lord will reign forever and ever.

One: Sing to the Lord,

All: for the Holy One has triumphed gloriously.

Suggested Hymns

“Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine!” (GtG⁴ 839)

“Here in This Place” (GtG 401)

“Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above” (GtG 645)

Call to Confession

(From Hebrews 10:21–22a)

One: Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach our Creator with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

Litany of Confession

(Based on Too Heavy A Yoke, Chanequa Walker-Barnes)

One: O mighty God, who created us in your image, we confess to pressuring ourselves to be all things to all people.

All: Have mercy on us.

One: O wise God, who created the Sabbath for us, we confess to busying ourselves to fulfill every tenet of a metaphorical woman.

All: Have mercy on us, O God.

One: Merciful God, who created guides for us, we confess that we have forced ourselves and others to measure ourselves against impossible standards.

All: Forgive us, O God.

One: Restful God, who offers your light yoke, we confess to perpetuating tropes of individual strength and radical self-sufficiency.

All: In your mercy, O God, forgive us.

One: As a result, we have neglected our well-being, others and the actual work you have called us to.

All: Forgive us, merciful God.

One: You have modeled rest for us.

All: Help us to embrace it.

One: You have shown us truth.

All: Help us to live it.

One: That we may live in wisdom and purpose.

All: In Christ, Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

(Based on Matthew 11:28–30)

As Jesus tells us, “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light, in me you will find rest for your souls.” Siblings in Christ receive the good news of the gospel. In Christ Jesus, we are forgiven.

Scripture Readings

Proverbs 31:10–31

Complementary Texts

Luke 10:38–42

Exodus 1:15–21

Alternative Text

Sirach 51:13–30

Sermon Starter

When preparing your sermon, read and reread the text. Make a note of all the different things this woman is said to do. Then note how the text has historically been used as a prescriptive template for women to fill. The woman in this text is “a wealthy, heterosexual, cisgender, married, mother,”⁵ with whom many people do not identify. Provide an alternative interpretation of the text in which all listeners can locate the good news. As noted by H. James Hopkins, “Perhaps this re-rendering is good news to someone who has been beating herself up because she cannot be ‘all things to all people.’” To know that this is not a portrayal of a single “Wonder Woman,” but is actually a composite of many women is affirming.⁶

Pay attention to the genre and form of the text. The form of an acrostic poem provides insight that this text is not a narrative of a historical figure. The poetic form of these verses alludes to its use as an archetype. Recognizing this steers us away from homiletical harm in saying that this is what all women should be. Emphasize this was not a real woman, and the scope of her accomplishments is more than one individual could do.

Explore the comparison of the Proverbs 31 woman with the Wisdom Woman of Proverbs 1–9. The Wisdom Woman speaks courageously to warn others against folly, is priceless, and is the source of all life. Comparing the two and identifying traits and commitments can lend itself to a liberating vision of the Proverbs 31 woman. It allows the sermon to connect with listeners who do not recognize themselves in the traditional, literal reading. Further, it points the sermon to the embodiment of God’s wisdom as tantamount, rather than earthly accomplishments that are not accessible to all.

Finally, it will be imperative to identify where and how the modern woman can locate herself in this text. One way is to highlight the ways women make a difference within the community for the common good or in caring for people in need. These things are not accomplished by a single person, but by everyone contributing. Everyone’s contribution is as important as another’s. No single person can or must do it alone.

Litany of Gratitude and Celebration

One: For the gifts of women throughout the ages,

All: we give thanks.

One: For the ways that they have shown up—from Shiphrah and Puah to Miriam and Hagar, from Deborah and Jael to Ruth and Rahab, to Vashti and Esther,

All: we celebrate you.

One: For their courage and strength, resistance and rest, wisdom and subversiveness,

All: we celebrate you.

One: For Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, we recognize your groundbreaking advocacy,

All: we give thanks for you.

One: For Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elisabeth, her cousin; we see your brave faith,

All: we honor you.

One: For Jephthah's daughter and the Benjamite's concubine, for Leah and Peninnah and all the women who have been reduced to their reproductive abilities,

All: we give thanks and honor, for you are so much more than that.

One: For Mary Magdalene, Martha, Mary, Joanna, Susanna, Rhoda, Dorcas, Tabitha, and the countless unnamed women of the sacred texts,

All: we center you from the margins and celebrate you.

One: For mothers, aunts, wives, daughters, sisters; for all the women—in every walk of life, throughout all space and time,

All: we give thanks. We celebrate you. We honor you.

All: Hallelujah! Amen.

Charge and Blessing

One: Go into the world, liberated ones. Remember God has liberated us from over-producing. Remember the gift of Sabbath. Embrace your gifts, knowing that you are enough.

All: Amen.

Postlude/Suggested Hymns

“For All the Faithful Women” (GtG 324) 

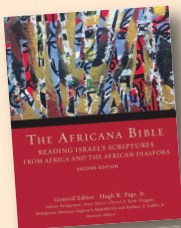
Anita Wright is pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Montclair, New Jersey. She has served her synod as the chaplain and is currently serving on the synod's Early Ministry Institute Design Team. She has also worked as an adjunct professor.

Notes

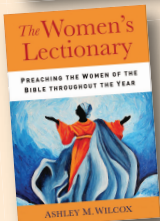
1. Wilda C. Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008), 157.
2. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, “For My Yoke Is Easy: Liberating Black Women from the Burden of Strength,” in *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 160.
3. Christine Roy Yoder, “The Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10–31,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 222, no. 3 (2003), 446.
4. GtG indicates *Glory to God! The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Geneva, 2013).
5. Christin Roy Yoder, “Proverbs,” in *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 241.
6. H. James Hopkins, “Homiletical Perspective on Proverbs 31:10–31” in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 4, Proper 20*, Eds David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 77.



Additional Resources and Suggestions



The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora
Edited by Hugh R. Page and associate editors Randall C. Bailey, Valerie Bridgeman, et al
Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010



The Woman's Lectionary: Preaching the Women of the Bible Throughout the Year
By Ashley M. Wilcox
Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2021