

chapter 8

Demystifying the

Proverbs 31 *Woman*



Chapter 8

The Proverbs 31 Woman and Ruth

Opening Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, You are the Mediator between God and man. Continue to mediate to us the blessings You have won by Your suffering and death, that we may be “little mediators” of Your blessings to others through our vocations; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever . Amen.

Key Term for This Chapter

Mediator: Someone who helps to “go between” two people in conflict in order to reconcile their differences. A mediator can also be someone through whom a message or gift is given. Jesus is the Mediator of God in both of these senses. He “goes between” our sinful selves and the Most Holy Father in order to reconcile us to God. Additionally, it is through Jesus and His death on our behalf that God mediates His blessings to mankind: life, salvation, forgiveness, and more.

Introduction

Now that we have looked at Proverbs 31:10-31 in the context of the rest of the Book of Proverbs, we’ll be expanding our study to the rest of the Old Testament. We have seen that comparing other texts can shed light on the text at hand. The same holds true as we take a wider look at Old Testament passages that help us to see more connections in Proverbs 31:10-31. We begin this chapter by looking at how the Book of Ruth and the woman of Proverbs 31 have both differences and similarities. In this way, Ruth helps us understand even more about what the Proverbs passage proclaims.

There are several main reasons why we will look at these two women together. The first is that in the original ordering of the Old Testament books as it stood in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Ruth followed directly on the

heels of the Book of Proverbs. That means that the description of the woman of strong character (the woman of *chayil*) at the end of Proverbs leads directly into the narrative of Ruth. While our English Bibles place Ruth after Judges, because it makes chronological sense, the Hebrew compilers deliberately grouped Proverbs and Ruth in this way due to theme and content similarities, especially between Proverbs 31:10-31 and the person of Ruth. A specific linguistic decision makes this connection legitimate. The term “woman of strength (*eshet woman chayil strength*)” is used only three times in the Old Testament: **Proverbs 12:4; 31:10; and Ruth 3:10-11.** This important word and its limited use as a descriptor of women closely ties the woman of Proverbs 31 and Ruth together and leads us to ask how they are connected, what makes them similar, and what makes them different.

Reading Assignment: As in the last chapter, some pre-reading of the Scripture passages at hand would be extremely helpful. Read Proverbs 31:10-31 again, and then read the entire Book of Ruth. At just four chapters, Ruth shouldn’t take long, and this will help you to compare the two women.

Discussion Question 1: As you read, see if you notice any similarities or differences that you find interesting. Jot them down here. What are some similar traits and characteristics of the two women? How are they different? How are their contexts perhaps different?

Similarities

The most important characteristic that the woman of Proverbs 31 and Ruth have in common is that they fear Yahweh. The woman of Proverbs is directly described as having the fear of Yahweh: “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (31:30). This characteristic is reinforced by the teaching of *chesed* (faithfulness, loving kindness), which is on her lips and by her activities on behalf of her household. For Ruth, her fear of Yahweh is depicted through her bold confession. **Ruth 1:16-17**. Here, Ruth pledges to Naomi her constancy and love and also confesses her faith in Yahweh, the God of Naomi and the Israelites. This is a striking speech for its intense loyalty to her mother-in-law, but also because Ruth is a Moabitess, and the Moabites were a pagan people. Her speech makes use of the covenant name of God, Yahweh, which was something given only to His people. This shows that she places her faith and trust in the one true God and that she has been made one of His own.

Her striking confession of faith connects Ruth to the God-fearing people in the wisdom books. Those who choose to follow Yahweh are commended, while those who do not “choose the fear of Yahweh”, but rather choose to hate knowledge and the gifts of God, are themselves despised and forewarned of their ultimate destruction **Proverbs 1:29-32**. Furthermore, Ruth trusts Yahweh to care for and protect her. Boaz recognizes this trust when he blesses her: **Ruth 2:12**. The wings of Yahweh are a reference to His protection and care of His people **Psalms 91:4**. His care and protection is all that Ruth needs for this life and life eternal.

Both women, then, trust in Yahweh to provide and keep them secure. They do not fear what is to come because they know that Yahweh is “strong” **Proverbs 10:29**. Ruth is like the woman of Proverbs 31 who is confident that everyone in her household has what is needed to survive whatever the future may bring **Proverbs 31:21, 25**. Due to their trust in Yahweh’s protection, both

women can be seen as being addressed further by **Psalm 91:5-6**. For those who trust in Yahweh and take refuge under His wings, there is nothing to fear.

Due to this trust and the wisdom that the fear of the Lord brings, both women are also active in caring for others. The woman of Proverbs 31, of course, cares for her household, which includes her husband, children, and servants. Her activity spans domestic concerns, business concerns, marital concerns, and even instruction in the ways of the Lord. She also serves the poor and needy in the midst of all the other activity. She is described often in terms of strength and physical labor, rolling up her sleeves and girding her dress in order to do the hard physical work of spinning, working the loom, cooking, and more.

Yahweh's Wings

Here are some other instances where Yahweh's care and protection are referred to in terms of His wings spreading over His people.

Deuteronomy 32:11-12, Psalm 17:8-9, Psalm 36:7, Psalm 57:1

Psalm 61:4, Psalm 63:7, Matthew 23:37

Ruth, similarly, is extremely active on behalf of her mother-in-law, Naomi. Her activity and busy care are especially set apart and highlighted by the fact that Naomi is so still and quiet. Mourning and grieving her loved ones, Naomi is unable to move about and be as active as she perhaps once was. So Ruth does the moving for two. She shows initiative in suggesting that she go to reap in the fields **Ruth 2:2**. She works hard and is dedicated **Ruth 3:7**. In a striking similarity to the woman of Proverbs 31, Boaz's foreman describes Ruth as having gleaned in the fields, "from early morning until now". This reminds us of the Proverbs woman, **Proverbs 31:15**. Ruth then gleanes, **Ruth**

2:23. Additionally, Ruth is active in bringing about Boaz's agreeing to marry her and redeem Naomi's husband's land. She again rises when it is dark and pursues him to the threshing floor. (Chapter 3). She not only provides for her and Naomi short term but ultimately long term. **Ruth 3:9-13.**

One final similarity is an extremely intriguing one. God understands both women to mediate God's blessings, first to those in close proximity to them, and then extended to others as well. In the Proverbs 31:10-31 text, the wife not only provides bodily needs but also spiritual ones. When she "opens her mouth" with "the teaching of kindness", she instructs her family in God's Word and His Wisdom. Through her, the husband is honored in the gates; through her, their household profits. *Samuel T S Goh* says that, "the overall thrust of Proverbs 31:10-31 implies that by virtue of her fear of Yahweh, this woman brings prosperity to the household and mediates Yahweh's blessings to her love ones. This extends also to people outside her household as the woman reaches out her hands to the poor and needy.

**Excursus: "Spread Your Wings" vs.
"Spread the Corner of Your Garment"**

There are two ways Ruth's request in Ruth 3:9 can be translated. The ESV chooses to preserve its connection to Boaz's blessing in 2:12 by translating it again as "spread your wings". In 2:12, Boaz notes that Ruth has come to take refuge under Yahweh's wings. By translating this idiomatic phrase in the same way in both places, it shows that Ruth is essentially asking Boaz to be the fulfillment of the very blessing he gave her. It recognizes that Ruth is asking Boaz to behave toward her in the same covenant way in which Yahweh behaves toward His people. The same phrase, however, can also be understood as "spread the corner of your garment over me". This may be the chosen phrase in other versions of the English translation of the biblical text. Both expressions are correct and often used to describe how Yahweh cares for His people. From Ezekiel 16:8, we see how the choice to translate it as "spread

the corner of your garment” is also helpful to the interpretation of Ruth. In this passage, Yahweh is speaking to Israel about how He chose her and rescued her from her sins: **Ezekiel 16:8.** The term is used as a way of describing that Yahweh has chosen to “marry” Israel. Taking her as a bride, He covers her sins (her “nakedness”) with His garment. So, understanding this meaning of the phrase shows that what Ruth is requesting is that Boaz marry her in order to care for her (and also Naomi) and protect them throughout their lives.

Ultimately, this is also what Yahweh has done for us through Jesus Christ. We are helpless and without hope, as were Ruth and Naomi, and covered in the muck of our sins, as was Israel. Yet Yahweh, through Christ, chooses to lay the garment of Christ’s righteousness over us, making us His people, the Church, and making the Church His Bride. He covers us with His wings of protection so that we, like Ruth and the woman of Proverbs 31, may fear nothing for our household and dwell securely in Him.

This is also true of Ruth. Through Ruth, Naomi receives the blessing of Yahweh’s provision of “daily bread”. Additionally, I would argue that through Ruth and her loving faithfulness toward Naomi, Naomi is also pulled out of her despondency and able to look beyond the bitter life circumstances she laments late in **Ruth 1: 20-21.** Compare that to the end of the book, after Ruth’s activity on Naomi’s behalf, which is really the way Yahweh has provided for Naomi. By the end of the book, Naomi’s fortunes are reversed. She is full physically, spiritually, and even with regard to her family. **Ruth 4:13-17.**

This, though, leads us into the other way that Ruth mediates Yahweh’s blessings to Naomi: she births a “redeemer” for Naomi. Literally, the baby Obed will redeem the land for Naomi, which her husband had sold for the use of others, and thereby provide for her always. He also redeems her husband’s name, bringing back to life a lineage that died with the deaths of her husband and sons. Ultimately though, Ruth “mediates to” Naomi the greatest blessing

of Yahweh: the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Yahweh uses Ruth to continue the line that would bring forth not only King David but also Yahweh's only Son, Jesus Christ, for the final and full redemption of Naomi and of all of us.

When we see these women within their vocations as “mediators” of Yahweh's blessings, we are reminded of the one Mediator of all that God wishes to gift to us—Jesus Himself. He is the Mediator of all of the blessings of Yahweh: daily bread, long life, eternal life, salvation, forgiveness of sins, wisdom, and adoption into God's family.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 2: What did we say was the most important similarity between the two women? How do they both show forth this characteristic?

Differences

One of the first differences between Ruth and the woman of Proverbs 31 is that we know for sure that Ruth was an historical person. The woman described in Proverbs 31 is a symbol and/or example rather than an historical person. She is the ideal woman as sought after in the wisdom books and a personification of that wisdom. However, her situation is rooted in historical reality as to life practices, economic status, and so on.

Ruth and the woman of Proverbs are of extremely different classes. The description of the woman of Proverbs brings to mind an upper-class woman. She manages the household and employs servants. Her goods are costly and come from foreign lands. She clothes her family in expensive fabrics with expensive colors (linen and scarlet). Some scholars even suggest that the

reference to her price being beyond jewels may refer to her dowry and that she possibly brought a great deal of wealth into her husband's family; however this does not have to be the case (and given the similarities to the descriptions of Wisdom, I think the reference to jewels has more to do with Wisdom than with a dowry, though both could be held together as a sort of double meaning). In any case, clearly the woman is a picture of the upper middle class.

On the other hand, Ruth is clearly of a lower class. Due to the deaths of their husbands, she and Naomi are destitute. Also, they have no income from the land that was owned by Naomi's husband in Israel because he had sold the proceeds of the land to someone else when they fled to Moab. Without the income from the crops raised on the land, the women are without recourse and left to the generosity of the community. When speaking with Boaz, Ruth does not even count herself as one of his maidservants, much less the manager of a household. She is involved in farming, specifically in gleaning what was left behind by the harvesters, while the woman of Proverbs is involved in domestic household duties and business ventures.

The most striking difference between them is their status before Yahweh prior to Ruth's confession. The woman of Proverbs 31 is a Hebrew, a woman belonging to God's chosen people. Her fear of the Lord and her gift of wisdom are not surprising in that sense, as she belongs to those to whom God gifts faith, Wisdom and fear of Him. Ruth, however, is a Moabite. She comes from the land of Moab. Moabites were enemies of God's people; they were not included in His promises. In fact, they were strictly forbidden to enter the Lord's assembly: **Deuteronomy 23:3**. This makes Ruth's confession of Yahweh and her shared title of "woman of strong character" (*eshet chayil*) even more striking and surprising.

Relatedly, Ruth does not live up to the laundry list or the A to Z list of all the activity ascribed to the woman of Proverbs 31. She has a few similarities

to the woman, and those similarities are not exhaustive. Yet she, too, is considered a woman of strong character. This points us to the truth that this title—woman of strong character—is not actually about the laundry list of things the women do. Rather, it is about who they are and why they do them. Both women, though of different classes and different faith backgrounds (Moabites were pagans), have the “fear of Yahweh” and possess wisdom. As a result of their confessions, they live lives of service and *chesed* (loving kindness/faithfulness) to all those who are near to them in their vocations. For Ruth, this means loving Naomi and bringing about what is necessary for her life. Ruth goes above and beyond what the Law requires of her in caring for Naomi (she did not even have an obligation to remain with Naomi and follow her home; she could have stayed with her own family in Moab). Her standing as a woman of strong character is not about her deeds, but about her confession of the one true God.

Similarly, the woman of Proverbs is praised as a woman of strong character because she is a woman who fears the Lord. The teaching of *chesed* (loving kindness/faithfulness) is on her tongue, and this is what informs her life. The picture created of her exhaustive activity points to the truth of who she is and is a result of who she is; her activity is not what *makes* her who she is. So even in their differences, the women remind us that who we are is grounded not in what we do but rather in our identity as those who have been brought into the family of God. We fear the Lord and partake of His wisdom; therefore, we act in ways that reflect who we are. They also remind us that the Lord brings all people into His fold and makes them His own, despite their past or their birth, their economic status, or their religious upbringing.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 3: What is the most striking difference between the two women? What important truth is emphasized by this difference?

Where Are the Men?

One final contrast between the two women is interesting in its own right, and that is how their husbands figure into the scriptural writings. With the woman of Proverbs 31, the husband seems to be a background figure. He is mentioned most often in regard to the benefits he receives from having such a wife, **Proverbs 31:28**. Even though it is really the children who do the activity, the husband is included. The woman is the absolute focus of the poem, the only one who is given a title (“woman of strong character”).

In Ruth, however, Boaz plays a major role, even before their marriage. In fact, Boaz himself is described as a man of strong character (often translated as “worth” in a nod to Boaz’s more stable financial condition). It is the exact same word as is used of Ruth and the woman of Proverbs 31: **Ruth 2:1**. He is the counterpart, in other words, to the woman of strong character (*chayil*). He actually has several similarities to the woman of Proverbs 31: from his generosity to the poor to his faithfulness to Yahweh (demonstrates Yahweh and in his actions on Ruth and Naomi’s behalf). He also demonstrates Yahweh-like characteristics when he takes Ruth under his “wings” by marrying her. Like the husband of Proverbs 31, Boaz does what the Wisdom Literature strongly suggests: he marries a woman of strong character who fears Yahweh and calls on His name.

The word *chayil* is used one more time in the Book of Ruth. It comes up in a blessing given by the people of the town: **Ruth 4:11-12**.

“Worthily” in verse 11 is the adverb form of the same root word used to describe the Proverbs woman, Ruth and Boaz. In other words, the townspeople give a blessing in which they hope that Boaz and Ruth will “do *chayil*”, together as a married couple. Both have already shown that they are people of strong character, and now they are encouraged to continue in this vein, doing together the things that reflect strong character and worth. In the context of the blessing, “do *chayil*” seems here to be tied to the building of their house, to having and raising children with many more generations to come.

Samuel Goh notes that the above two verses in Ruth form a parallel construction and therefore interpret one another. Ruth 4:11 wishes and hopes that through Ruth another great house, like that of Jacob (whose wives were Rachel and Leah), would be built up. This house should, moreover, be like that of Perez, the son of Judah and Tamar. **Genesis 38.** It is from Judah’s line, through Perez, that the promise of a king was to be kept. So they are not wishing just for a large family, but for the building of a lineage that would be of benefit to all Israel the genealogy of Ruth further clarifies that to “do *chayil*” is to bring about King David. Boaz gains a “name” by being associated with the royal line leading to King David. Goh says that in this way, Ruth can be seen as royal, and no longer just a lowly handmaiden. Due to this, Ruth fulfills what is said of the Proverbs 31 woman: “many women do *chayil*, but you surpass them all, **Proverbs 31:29.** Ruth is a surpassing woman of strong character because she is now royal, in the lineage of a king.

Ruth completes the picture of God’s *chesed*, His loving faithfulness and mercy toward all people. In Proverbs, the foreign woman is “the very opposite of wisdom. Yet the book of Ruth recounts the transformation of a *nokriyah* [foreigner] **Ruth 2:10** to woman of strong character, **Ruth 3:11.** The author of Ruth associates the wisdom ideal (*eshet chayil*) with a foreign woman (*nokriyah*). Ruth, then, is a proclamation from Yahweh that *anyone* can be the

woman of strong character. The foreign woman can be redeemed and brought to confess Yahweh. She can become a woman of strong character, a woman who fears the Lord and possesses His wisdom. This is a testament to the transforming power of God’s faithfulness and mercy, as well as His plan to include people of all nations through His Son, Jesus Christ.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 4: Another difference is the focus on Boaz in Ruth as compared to brief mentions of the husband in Proverbs 31. How do Ruth and Boaz together point us to Jesus? How do they “do *chayil*”

Conclusion

The comparison with the Book of Ruth helps us to shed light on the Proverbs 31 woman and what her poem means. When we see that Ruth, who by all rights belongs with the pagan peoples opposed to Yahweh’s people and outside of the faith, is given the same honorific title as the woman of Proverbs 31, it reinforces that the Proverbs woman is not praised because of her deeds but because she fears the Lord. It points us to Jesus, who takes us who belong outside of the faith and brings us into the faith, not because of our deeds or our actions but because of His faithfulness and His gift of faith to us. He makes us people who fear the Lord and confess His name.

Furthermore, both women point us to Jesus by acting as “mediators” of God’s blessings. The lineage from Ruth does not end with King David. Rather, it stretches to the Seed promised from Genesis onward—Jesus Christ. The thing Ruth and Boaz “do” is the thing God brings about through them: the lineage that leads to the one true and everlasting King, Jesus. Ruth, then, is a mediator of God’s blessings in more than one way: she mediates Yahweh’s

immediate blessings to Naomi by giving birth to the child who would “redeem” Naomi’s land and care for her until the time of her death. She also mediates Yahweh’s blessing of Jesus Christ, in a sense, by becoming the ancestress of Jesus. The Proverbs woman is shown to mediate God’s blessings **Proverbs 31:26**. Through her material provision for her family, as well as her teaching of Yahweh’s precepts, she mediates both the material and spiritual blessings of Yahweh to her family.

There is, however, only one true Mediator between God and man, and that is Jesus Christ. He mediates the blessings God gives to us, both physical and spiritual blessings, from daily bread to everlasting life. As the woman of Proverbs 31 mediates God’s blessings to her family, we see again a clue as to who she truly pictures for us and who she truly is. While Ruth is a type of Christ, a person in the Holy Scriptures who shares some of His characteristics and points us toward Him, the Proverbs 31 woman actually is Wisdom, and Jesus is Wisdom Incarnate. She is a picture of the only One who ever feared the Lord perfectly and who mediates all that God has to give to His people.

In looking at how Proverbs 31 and Ruth are similar and how they are different, we see again how these passages weave together to proclaim Christ to us by depicting Him as Wisdom Incarnate and through the many similar activities and characteristics seen in Ruth and the woman of Proverbs 31. It offers a corrective to our thinking that we must adhere to a certain checklist of things to do and ways to be. Rather, it proclaims to us that Jesus has already fulfilled all righteousness and mediates that righteous standing to us, even more fully than the women mediate His blessings to their families within their vocations. It also emphasizes God’s faithfulness and mercy in including all people. The Proverbs woman may be the perfect woman and the opposite of the foreign woman, but Ruth shows that even the “foreign woman” can be made God’s own dear child.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 5: Both women can be seen as “mediators” of God’s blessings. What blessings do they mediate? How do they point to Jesus in this way? How is Jesus the ultimate Mediator?
