

The biblical ideal of womanhood in Proverbs 31

The Rev. Tracy Wells Miller

Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

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“A capable wife who can find?”

That opening line from our Hebrew scripture reading today grates on my nerves. It bothers me because I hear within it a cynical assumption that most wives *aren't* capable, that it's difficult to find a capable wife.

Overly sensitive? Maybe. I have to admit that I tend to get my hackles up when I come across a passage in the Bible talking about what the ideal woman should do or be. Because a lot of it isn't good:

There are the passages in the New Testament epistles telling women to be submissive to their husbands, silent in church, and not permitting them to have authority over men. Then there are all the stories in the Hebrew scriptures where women are raped and murdered, treated as property and disrespected, and this is just routine behavior, nothing that is called out or commented on. In the scriptures and throughout Christian tradition, women have often been portrayed in extreme caricature, either as the pure chaste virgin or the evil, seductive harlot.

But lest we think that was all “back then,” before human beings were more “evolved” or “enlightened,” let us not forget that women continue to be devalued, abused, and restricted – sometimes by law – in places all over the world. The kinds of negative attitudes towards women that we find in the Bible are far from a distant artifact of history. They are all too real for millions of women living today.

Given all that, you'll have to forgive me and some of my sisters in the church if we seem a little angry and cynical about the Bible's depiction of and instructions to women.

But, thanks be to God, the biblical witness and teaching on women is much more complex than is normally presented. The scriptures do not speak with one voice on many things, and the “role of women” is one of those things. Even given the restrictive prevailing assumptions of the culture of the time

and place in which it was written, there *are* glimpses of powerful women leaders in our scriptures:

- The women leaders in the Hebrew scriptures we'll be talking about in our Faith Leader program over the next few weeks:
 - o Deborah, who led the Israelites into battle,
 - o Shiprah and Puah, the midwives who refused to obey the Pharaoh's command to kill all the firstborn children among the Hebrews,
 - o Esther, who saved the Jewish people from genocide at the hands of the Persian king
- The women disciples who followed Jesus and "provided for him out of their resources."
- The women who never left Jesus's side at the tomb and were the first witnesses to the resurrection, the first apostles – the first ones "sent forth" to share the good news.

Interestingly enough, the "Proverbs 31 woman," idealized archetype though she may be, is one of those powerful women leaders in the Bible. Although this passage is a favorite in churches that favor traditional gender roles, the woman this passage describes is far from a demure, obedient housewife.

The "Proverbs 31 woman" is an entrepreneur, running her own textile business. Thousands of years before Costco, she is apparently a wholesale supplier, since verse 24 mentions that she "supplies the merchant with sashes." Verse 16 tells us that "she considers a field and buys it," so apparently she is able to purchase land of her own accord, something that would have been unheard of for a woman to do in her culture. Her income is clearly her own, and she is able to make independent decisions about how it is spent. She provides food for the family, not necessarily by cooking it, but by purchasing it. And she does all this while also caring for her children and advocating for the poor and oppressed. Long before Sheryl Sandberg coined the term "lean in," this woman was doing it. She was bringing home the bacon and frying it up in a pan.

So why is it that I've always associated the "Proverbs 31 woman" with domestic life and traditional gender roles? Because the majority of the church's teaching on this passage have depicted her that way.

The passage says that she "does her husband good and not harm," and somehow that was interpreted to mean that she is a submissive servant. For

example, in a list of the “10 virtues of the Proverbs 31 woman” on the website of a ministry called “A Virtuous Woman,” named after Proverbs 31, #2 on the list of virtues is “marriage,” which is elaborated on in the following summary:

“A Virtuous Woman respects her husband. She does him good all the days of her life. She is trustworthy and a helpmeet.”

The terms “finances” and “industry” are #6 and #7 on the list, clearly less important than the “top three” virtues of Faith, Marriage, and Mothering, and even though they make it on the list, the definitions of what is meant by these virtues appear to bear no resemblance to the activities of the woman in Proverbs 31:

“6. Finances – A Virtuous Woman spends money wisely. She is careful to purchase quality items which her family needs.

7. Industry – A Virtuous Woman works willingly with her hands. She sings praises to God and does not grumble while completing her tasks.”

“She is careful to purchase quality items which her family needs?” What about considering a field and buying it with the financial proceeds from her business? Not mentioned anywhere in this list of qualities for women to emulate.

And her industry is “working willingly with her hands?” How about selling to merchants and managing profitable merchandise? Again, not mentioned anywhere in this list.

Even the term used to describe this woman is somewhat of a mistranslation. The NRSV, which we heard this morning, has “capable.” “Virtuous” is another common translation, as seen in the information just described. “Noble” is another.

But the Hebrew word used here, “ha-yil,” is most often translated as “valiant, valorous, strong, mighty.” The root word means “firm” or “strong.” It is used most often to describe God and to describe men in battle.

So, the proverbial female speaker in Proverbs 31, telling her son what kind of woman he should look for in a wife, tells him that he should look for a strong, firm, mighty woman – a businesswoman with financial autonomy who acts compassionately toward those in need, motivated by her strong faith. And ironically, the description of this “ideal woman” actually contains very little mention of husband and children, except for the fact that they exist and she is good to them. Much more time is spent describing her professional work. Quite a different picture of an “ideal woman” than we are used to hearing from the scriptures.

So ladies, the next time someone tells you you should be patterning your life on the “biblical standard of womanhood,” you might ask them for clarification: “Did you mean the part about being a strong, decisive leader, or the part about being a successful businesswoman?”