

# The virtuous woman

Ernest Stallworthy

**O**NE OF THE themes of the book of Proverbs is wisdom. Wisdom, its attributes and its rewards, are extolled. We see that wisdom was in the foundation and the creation of all things. We are told that wisdom had a purpose with this creation, and work to accomplish, pillars to hew out, to take the figure we find in the opening verses of the ninth chapter. Together with this, we have a collection of proverbs, or hidden sayings, put before us, presenting the practical outcome of wisdom—wisdom in action, as it were. From time to time, wisdom is personified before us as a woman, and contrasted with the “foolish woman [who] is clamorous” (9:13).

In the closing chapter of this book we meet “a virtuous woman” whose “price is far above rubies” (31:10). This woman has a husband of whom it is said that his heart “doth safely trust in her” (v. 11), and she is the embodiment of wisdom. Verse 26 says: “She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness”.

Here we have a parable (the word ‘proverb’ in the Old Testament conveys the same thought as ‘parable’ in the New Testament). The literal picture is of a wife who loves her husband and all her house, cares for them all, remembers the poor and needy, and looks for the fruit of her labours. This is a literal picture, but it has a hidden meaning—a meaning which is opened up to us as we compare Scripture with Scripture.

## The bride of Christ

Consider, first of all, the words of Paul to our Corinthian brethren and sisters: “I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2). Here the brethren and sisters then, and all who love Christ, and wait for his appearing, are gathered into one symbol—the symbol of a woman having Christ as her prospective husband and lord. We meet the same thought in the letter to the Ephesians, where once again a comparison is drawn between marriage and the relationship between Christ and his ecclesia. Here the apostle speaks of Jesus desiring to present to himself a glorious

ecclesia, “not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (5:25-27).

Thus we see ourselves, in common with all the saints, as the bride patiently waiting for her Lord, awaiting that time described as “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9). When we turn to consider the symbols which portray for us the bride in all her glory and beauty in that day to which we look, we find three main figures. In the Song of Solomon, for instance, we see the bride, the beloved of her lord, described in words which Paul echoed in Ephesians: “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee” (4:7); and it is her physical beauty which is brought to the fore.

Thus the Spirit depicts her beauty of character through her personal attributes. This picture is elaborated and added to in other places in the Word. Psalm 45 runs parallel in theme with the Song in many ways, and there again the personal beauty of the bride of the King is dwelt upon. She is “all glorious within: her clothing is of wrought gold” (v. 13).

In the book of Revelation, however, where John is privileged to see “the bride, the Lamb’s wife” (21:9), her personal beauty is not enlarged upon. John sees instead “that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God” (v. 10). Here organisation in rulership is to the fore. The power is of God, and the figure of a Divine municipality, “a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10), is used conveniently to illustrate the political organisation of the saints in that day, centred upon God and His Son Jesus, the twelve apostles in their appointed places, ruling over the twelve tribes of Israel, whilst each individual saint takes his appropriate position, over ten cities, five, or one.

The picture in Proverbs 31 is different again. In this figure the personal appearance of the bride, now the wife of her lord, is not mentioned. The symbol is indeed giving us yet another view of the end of the matter, for we see a wife, not one espoused, and so we have a parable parallel in time with the other two that we have just glanced at, but dwelling upon yet another aspect

of the glory of that day. There are, of course, incidental touches which link up with the Song and with John's vision. For instance, it is said of her that "She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard" (v. 16). Here is a hint of the organisational ability which is the theme of the "new Jerusalem". Yet again, of that city it is said, "there shall be no night there" (Rev. 21:25). In verse 18 of Proverbs 31 we have the parallel: "her candle goeth not out by night".

### A woman of care

In the Song we saw her beauty of character in the figure of a lovely woman, a delight to behold, the description crowned with the tribute, "there is no spot in thee". Here in Proverbs that is but touched upon, she is "a virtuous woman . . . her price is far above rubies" (v. 10). So, whilst we would expect there to be parallels, there is yet a very different aspect now to the fore. In the Song, beauty of character, the beauty of holiness, is the theme; in Revelation, the power and glory of political rulership from Zion, with judgement and justice, come to the fore; in this closing chapter of Proverbs, however, we see emphasised in many different ways the care, the loving concern, the wise forethought, which the saints will exercise in the age to come, in gentle, loving oversight of their peoples.

This all-embracing maternal care is brought out in many ways as we read through Proverbs 31. On the physical plane, taking the literal figure first, she provides all her household with food, raiment and shelter. Her providence is not only immediate, but long-sighted and thoughtful. She does not spare herself to provide all that is necessary: "She riseth also while it is yet night" (v. 15). As we have said, there is a spiritual lesson hidden behind this practical picture. We will readily recognise that the peoples of that day and age for which we wait will need instruction, teaching and guidance in all things, both material and spiritual.

Material blessing will abound when "There shall be a handful of corn in the earth upon the top of the mountains; the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon" (Ps. 72:16). Spiritual wellbeing will be assured when not only shall they "teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them" (Jer. 31:34), but also, as Isaiah says, "thine eyes shall see thy teachers:

and thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left" (30:20,21). This is the spiritual fulfilment of the parable of Proverbs 31.

### Present attributes

However, we are not, perhaps, quite so quick to recognise and realise that this care and concern manifested towards others is not an attribute to be planted in us, along with immortality, through the power of God in that day. It is rather a quality of character which has to be developed now. So, as we give consideration to the admirable qualities of this virtuous woman, we are in effect seeing attributes of character which must be seen in us if we would attain to glory, honour and immortality—attributes, therefore, which are our immediate concern.

If we consider the matter broadly, we see two main aspects in the work of the virtuous woman: her relationship with her husband, and her relationship toward her household. All our thoughts and all our actions must come under one or other of these two heads, as affecting our relationship towards God or towards man. Jesus declared that all the Law and the prophets depended upon two fundamental principles of the law of love: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart . . . and thy neighbour as thyself" (Lk. 10:27). Everything we do in the Truth, all our walk, should be an elaboration of these two principles.

The most important point that we have to remember is that this scripture, like all the Scriptures, is addressed to *all* of us and not just to some of us. The care which this woman displays is a care we should *all* display, not only some of us. To take a simple example: let us not think that all teaching in the Word and exhortation comes from the platform, from those who prepare addresses. We can each, and should, exhort, instruct and admonish one another, both by word and by example. This sense of responsibility which we all should feel is the main theme here. We see a bride imbued with a sense of responsibility; her household is her care, her concern. She has a maternal feeling, well discharged, for "She looketh well to the ways of her household" (Prov. 31:27).

Do we feel responsible for one another, responsible in the way that a mother feels responsibility for her family, responsible in the way expressed by Paul when he spoke of "that

which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28)? Truly, we have not, cannot have, the widespread anxiety felt by the apostle, in a personal sense, but we most certainly should have this feeling for those with whom we are in constant contact. The problems, the joys and the sorrows of each one should be those of us all, even as it is written: "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep" (Rom. 12:15). Yet again we read: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Another scripture commends the faithful servant who gives "meat in due season" (Lk. 12:42) to his brethren. None of these scriptures is addressed to a particular group or class, but to *all*, to the young as well as to the old, to sisters as well as brethren. Indeed, it is only as we truly manifest this care and concern for one another's wellbeing in all things, both material

and spiritual, that we can be knit together in the bond of love.

### The living reality

As week by week we partake together of the bread and the wine, this is an outward expression of the communion, the fellowship, which we should have one with another. We eat the same bread and drink from the same cup to display that we are indeed one family, all brethren and sisters together. Let us strive, if but feebly and weakly (but God is our strength), to translate this outward token into an abiding, living reality, even as he did. Thus we read: "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren . . . My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth" (1 Jno. 3:16,18).



## Exposition

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# Accounting for Abraham (2)

John Adey

**I**N PART 1 of this study I referred to the incident recorded in Genesis 15:5 where God drew Abraham's attention to the innumerable stars of heaven, saying, "So shall thy seed be". I would now like to extend my consideration of this.

### Counting stars

It is important to note that Abraham's inability to count the stars was not a negative experience for him. The reason for this lay in what the host of stars represented to him personally. This positive moment of revelation would increase, not diminish, his interest in numbers, or reckoning, after that. Indeed, as shown in the table, he put numbers to much use. In this instance in Genesis 15, however, God had done the calculation. Abraham counts with his knowledge and belief about his Creator, and God responds with His spiritual reckoning of Abraham.

Reckoning on this same basis, that nothing was too hard for God (18:14), both Sarah and he, though aged, were rewarded with the (begin-

ning of the) promised seed, in Isaac. God resurrected ('quicken'd') Sarah's womb, showing that overcoming death is the ultimate hope in the promise of the seed:<sup>1</sup> "Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, *so many* as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable" (Heb. 11:12). Or, as Abraham is presented in Romans 4 (I give a literal rendering in **bold** type): "(as it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before Him Whom he believed, even God, Who quickeneth the dead, and **calls the not being, as being.**"<sup>2</sup> Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many

1. All this preceded Mount Moriah, and thus fortified, or focused, his thinking on that occasion.
2. I have adjusted the translation to conform more closely to the Greek. It also helps to focus on the aspect of 'beings' yet to be, by resurrection, those who died in faith, for whom the gospel effects renewed life (Mt. 22:32).