Demystifying the Proverbs 31 Woman
Demystifying the Proverbs 31 Woman

Elizabeth Ahlman
This book is dedicated to my daughters Helene and Clara. May you always know that in Christ, you are the faithful woman.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Key Terms and Concepts</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1:</td>
<td>Brief Introduction to the Book of Proverbs</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2:</td>
<td>Close Reading of Proverbs 31:10–18</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3:</td>
<td>Chiastic Structure of Proverbs 31:10–31 and Close Reading of the Central Unit (vv. 19–20)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4:</td>
<td>Close Reading of Proverbs 31:20–31</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5:</td>
<td>Proverbs 31:10–31 and Proverbs 31:1–9</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6:</td>
<td>Proverbs 31:10–31 in the Context of Proverbs Chapters 1–9</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 8:</td>
<td>The Proverbs 31 Woman and Ruth</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 9:</td>
<td>Proverbs 31:10–31 and the Hymn Genre: Corollaries to Psalms 111 and 112</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 10:</td>
<td>The Woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 and the Bride of the Song of Songs</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 11:</td>
<td>Conclusion: The Woman as a Portrait of Wisdom/Christ, as a Portrait of the Church, and as a Portrait of Who We Are in Christ</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answer Guide</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

This morning, before sitting down to write this, I have already done a myriad of things: I woke up; threw in the last load of laundry I hadn't finished last night; took my eldest's clean clothes to his room to put them away so he could dress for the day; started the oven for breakfast and put in the baby's favorite meal; nursed the baby; got her in the high chair; made breakfast for me, the baby, and the three-year-old (hubby made it for himself and our eldest); ate; wiped down the baby and three-year-old and settled them in the living room; cleaned up everybody's dishes and started the dishwasher; organized photos for a work assignment; sent several lengthy work emails, including captioning the photos and crafting a summary paragraph of an event for a publication; wiped the baby's nose, nursed her again, and put her to nap; put away a few of my husband's and my clean clothes (also leftover from yesterday); moved the towels from the dryer to the couch to be folded later; moved the towels from the washer into the dryer; took a shower; dressed the three-year-old, wiped his nose, and gave him cough medicine; started writing.

It's 10:21 a.m.

I suppose I should be feeling a lot like the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 right now, at least according to the way this passage is treated by many. I should be pretty proud of myself, right? But I most assuredly do not and am not. Because, as I sit here writing, the high-chair tray still bears this morning's crumbs, there is folded clean laundry all over the living room, there are two loads of towels yet to be folded and put away, I just realized I forgot to pack a snack for my eldest, and my mom guilt is flaring because my three-year-old is playing by himself. I also spent at least thirty minutes looking at Facebook over the course of this morning, so clearly I could have done better. That list looks long, but the list of things I haven't done seems longer (there's more I haven't mentioned), and the list of things I need to do is longer still. If I looked to my list to feel satisfied, I absolutely would always feel like a failure.

I don't think I'm alone in feeling this way. I think other women, no matter their vocations, feel this way a lot of the time. And I think sometimes Scripture, wrongly or partially understood and used, often makes us feel worse.

That's why when Peggy Kuethe, my editor at Concordia Publishing House, asked me to write a study on Proverbs 31:10–31, I immediately both knew how right she was about its necessity and felt scared about how to approach
a full-on study just on this passage and how to confront my own issues, expectations, and baggage that might come with it, given the popularity of this passage and the ministries named after it.

In the present day, Proverbs 31:10–31 has become a beloved but also misunderstood Scripture passage. Many women look to it for prescriptive guidance on how to be a better woman. However, this passage of Scripture, like any other, must be contextualized within the canon of the Scriptures in order to be fully understood and appreciated. Seen in the context of Proverbs, especially chapters 1–9, Proverbs 31:10–31 is not a stand-alone passage, but rather a part of the fabric of the Wisdom that the Proverbs as a whole reveal. As this acrostic poem is also placed alongside passages from the Book of Ruth, Song of Songs, the entirety of the Old Testament writings, and indeed, passages from the canonical books of the New Testament, what shines through is not a prescription for how to be a better wife, mother, woman, or friend, but a description of our Savior, the Church, and ourselves, by virtue of our Baptism.

As I’ve read more and more about this passage and as I’ve studied the Scriptures that link to it directly and indirectly, so much rich meaning has been opened. I hope that together we can unfold the riches this portion of Proverbs has to offer. Together, we will find Jesus here.
How to Use This Study

This study can be used by an individual or in a group study. As an individual, you can pace yourself as you see fit. The questions are interspersed throughout each chapter so they are placed in proximity to where they are “answered” in the text. To compare, you can also look at the Answer Guide at the end of the book. If you cannot read this book in a women’s Bible study, I suggest perhaps reading it with at least one friend so you can talk over your ideas and impressions. However, it is possible and fine to do this study alone.

In a group setting, a leader facilitates the schedule and discussion. I suggest that the group begin with an introductory session. One idea is to assign one or two of the Key Terms and Concepts to each participant. Perhaps they could research them a bit further and share what they find. This might help the group become more familiar with the concepts. Otherwise, groups can simply begin with the first chapter. Discussion is enriched when group members read the chapter and note their answers to the questions prior to the group gathering. Then, participants come together and enjoy a productive discussion. During the group meeting, you may want to discuss other topics you’ve noted in the chapter, review passages you found particularly interesting or helpful, or discuss additional questions. The introduction and chapter 1 can be combined for the first week. After that, one chapter per week would be plenty to comb through. The leader will facilitate the discussions and refer to the Answer Guide as needed.

You certainly are not limited to the discussion questions here! If your group has other questions to ask, go for it! That said, I suggest that you go to your pastor with any concerns or questions about anything you read here. If possible, a pastor or deaconess could lead the study. If not, the study leader should seek your pastor’s approval of the materials you use. May God bless your study!
Here are the key terms and concepts used throughout the study. Each chapter will highlight a couple of key terms at the beginning of that chapter but will not list all of them. Turn here to revisit a term that’s been covered in a previous chapter without having to search for it.

**Acrostic Poem:** Poem in which the first word of each line begins with a letter of the alphabet. Each successive line begins with the next letter of the alphabet (in order). For poetry originally written in Hebrew, the acrostic nature unfortunately does not come through in English translations. (Chapter 1)

**Chayil:** Hebrew word used to describe the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31. *Chayil* means “strength, worth, excellence.” We will refer to this word often throughout this study. (Chapter 2)

**Chiasm:** Structure in a text where related words or phrases are repeated to create a unit with emphasized meanings. It will have the structure ABB’A’ or ABCBA’. The phrases or words in the chiasm mirror each other. (Chapter 3)

**Coda:** Final summary section in a poem, musical piece, or other type of writing. It sums up the preceding section(s) and reminds the reader of the main themes. (Chapter 4)

**Eschatological:** Eschatology is the study of the end times. (Chapter 4)

**Fear of Yahweh/of the Lord:** The “fear of Yahweh” can encompass trembling fear on being confronted with His holiness or when we remember our sins. But the “fear of Yahweh” that is praised in the Proverbs is that which is a gift of God to those whom He has made His children. It is faith and trust in His good and gracious promises above all things and puts us into a relationship of child to Father. It causes us to turn from evil and walk in His ways. (Chapter 1)

**Fulcrum:** Central portion of a longer chiasm (not every chiasm has one). This word or phrase is often set apart by the repeated words or phrases and can be seen as the central idea being emphasized by the chiastic structure. (Chapter 3)

**Hadar:** Hebrew word for “honor,” “majesty,” or “adornment.” This refers often in Israel’s praise to Yahweh’s regal majesty. (Chapter 9)

**Hymn Genre:** Type of writing in Scripture that offers praise to Yahweh. It
often features the word “hallelujah” (“praise the LORD”) and enumerates the works and attributes of Yahweh for which He should be praised. (Chapter 9)

_Incarnate:_ To be “incarnate” is to be enfleshed. Literally, to take on flesh. We confess that Jesus Christ took on our flesh in order to redeem us from our sins. We confess Him to be God Incarnate for us. Jesus became incarnate (took on flesh) in the womb of Mary and was born as a human child, both fully God and fully man, so that He could redeem us from our sins. Since Jesus is the Wisdom of God, He is Wisdom Incarnate—wisdom in the flesh—and not just an abstract idea or concept. (Chapter 7)

_Inclusio:_ Formed when a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning and end of a portion of text. Serves to bracket off that text for closer inspection. (Chapter 3)

_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. (Chapter 8)

_Oz (Strength):_ Hebrew word for strength, encompassing both physical and personal strength. It is bestowed by God on His people and is an essential attribute of God (that is, something that makes Him who He is). By His strength, power, and might, Yahweh leads, guides, protects, and defends His people. He grants this strength to His people as a gift such that they trust in Him to deliver them from all that threatens them. This word is used several times in the poem to describe the woman. (Chapter 4)

_Symmetry:_ In literature, symmetry occurs when the parts of a poem or piece of work mirror each other in form, creating a “sameness.” This might take the shape of two halves of a piece that are the same with regard to number of lines, vocabulary, length, rhythm, or theme (or several of these characteristics). (Chapter 5)

_Theme:_ Important idea or concept conveyed through word choice, style, and more. The theme is central to the text and helps to convey its meaning. For instance, we can see through the repetition of the word “good” in the creation narrative that the theme of that narrative is that God’s work in creation is “good,” indeed, “very good.” The main unifying theme of the Book of Proverbs is Wisdom, the fear of Yahweh and the contrast between the way of Yahweh
and the way of other gods. (Chapter 6)

**Theophanic Language:** Theophany is a manifestation of God, a way in which God reveals Himself. Theophanic language reveals something about God—such as His attributes (the unchanging aspects of who God is, such as perfection, omnipotence, etc.). (Chapter 10)

**Torah:** The first five books of the Bible, which comprise what is considered the “Law”: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. (Chapter 1)

**Type:** Points forward to something that is fulfilled in Christ. Types can be persons but can also be institutions or events. Person: David is a type of Christ. He is a person who points us forward to Jesus because of certain similar characteristics, such as the fact that he is called a “son” by Yahweh. When we read about David as king of Israel and about his desire to seek after the things of God, we are pointed forward to Christ, who perfectly fulfills all that David was. Institution: Solomon’s temple itself is both a type of the worship that was happening concurrently in heaven when the temple was built and a type that points forward to Christ’s redemption. Events: The apostle Paul says that the salvation accomplished by God through Noah’s ark is a type of Baptism (see 1 Peter 3:18–22). (Chapter 10)

**Wasf:** Arabic word means “description” and refers to a specific type of poetry typically recited during marriage celebrations in the Arabic world. Often, these poems praise the physical attributes of the bride and groom who are to be married. Christopher Mitchell notes that they serve as an “emotive portrait” and not an exact image. The descriptions therein create a “sensory image” that invites the reader to agree with the praise being given through the description. A wasf takes the form of a list. (Chapter 10)

**Wisdom:** Wisdom has two sides. One is the practical side whereby people acquire the wisdom to live day to day. All wisdom of that nature flows out of the Wisdom of God, which is the divine side. Wisdom is an attribute of God that is gifted to His people. By it we grasp the things of God—His grace and mercy to us in His Son, Jesus Christ. Ultimately, Jesus is Wisdom Incarnate. (Chapter 1)

**Wisdom Psalm/Genre:** A Wisdom Psalm reflects principles of the Wisdom Genre. It features “fear of the LORD/Yahweh,” the “blessing” formula, beatitudes, a contrast between the wicked and the righteous, and other wisdom

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characteristics. (Chapter 9)

**Yahweh:** Proper name of God given to Moses in the encounter at the burning bush (Exodus 3). It is the name by which God's people called upon Him. It is represented in the English text as **Lord** in uppercase letters. During the intertestamental period, with the rise of Judaism, Jewish scribes placed the vowel pointings for the Hebrew word for Lord (Adonai) under the consonants for the name of Yahweh (YHWH) to signal the reader to avoid accidentally taking Yahweh's name in vain by saying “Adonai/Lord” instead of Yahweh. As God's people by our Baptism, we have also been given His name. I will use Yahweh throughout this study. (Chapter 1)
OPENING PRAYER: Lord Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, on the road to Emmaus, You opened the Scriptures to Your disciples and showed them all that the Law and the Prophets spoke of You. Open the Scriptures to us so that we may see You proclaimed in all that is written there; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Key Terms for This Chapter

Acrostic Poem: Poem in which the first word of each line begins with a letter of the alphabet. Each successive line begins with the next letter of the alphabet (in order). For poetry originally written in Hebrew, the acrostic nature unfortunately does not come through in English translations.

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Torah: The first five books of the Bible, which comprise what is considered the “Law”: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Wisdom: Wisdom has two sides. One is the practical side whereby people acquire the wisdom to live day to day. All wisdom of that nature flows out of the Wisdom of God, which is the divine side. Wisdom is an attribute of God that is gifted to His people. By it, we grasp the things of God—His grace and mercy to us in His Son, Jesus Christ. Ultimately, Jesus is Wisdom Incarnate.

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Introduction

When most people think of the Book of Proverbs, they think of pithy sayings such as “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6) or “Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble” (Proverbs 21:23) or “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1).

When thought of in this way, the book seems choppy and disconnected. It often leads us to treat Proverbs as being only about these seemingly stand-alone snippets of advice, warning, or general life-truths. However, as R. Reed Lessing and Andrew Steinmann remind us in their introduction to the Old Testament, Prepare the Way of the Lord: “Proverbs is not known for great passages that show us God’s love, but to read it without this perspective is to misread its message. . . . However, with an understanding of the centrality of the gospel, the sayings in this book reveal life in this world that anticipates the glorious life in the eternal kingdom that God wishes to grant to all people.”

In other words, the heart of the Proverbs is God’s love for us in His Son, Jesus Christ, and they point us forward to fulfillment in Him. In Him, they are connected; in Him, they are more than just pithy sayings. In Him, they are a picture of how life was meant to be and how it will be when He returns in glory.

In this chapter, we’ll explore some of the background information concerning the Book of Proverbs to help us have the framework we need to interpret it, especially with regard to Proverbs 31:10–31.

Date, Authorship, and Form

While the Proverbs were written by several writers and were gathered together by later editors, they are tied together by themes and content. Also, it seems that the final editor(s) gathered them in ways that make them flow together around certain themes and which bring them full circle. Lessing and

3 Lessing and Steinmann, Prepare the Way of the Lord, 315.
Steinmann break down the parts of the Proverbs and their authors:

**Outline of Proverbs and Attested Authorship**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prov. 1:1–9:18</td>
<td>Solomon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov. 10:1–22:16</td>
<td>Solomon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov. 22:17–24:22</td>
<td>Wise People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov. 24:23–34</td>
<td>Wise People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov. 25:1–29:27</td>
<td>Solomon (as copied by Hezekiah's men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov. 30:1–33</td>
<td>Agur, Son of Jakeh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov. 31:1–9</td>
<td>Lemuel (or his mother)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov. 31:10–31</td>
<td>Unknown, but possibly written by the final editor(^4)</td>
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Portions written by Solomon would have been written between 971 and 932 BC. The rest of the Proverbs were likely finished by some time around Judah’s late monarchic period, which places the writing of Proverbs 31:10–31, if written last by the final editor, between 686 and 457 BC. This period took place after Hezekiah’s rule (during which time some proverbs were copied by his men) and just prior to the time of Ezra. By the time of Ezra, the Old Testament canon was closed,\(^5\) so nothing could have been added to Proverbs at that time. Everything that we see now had to have been in place.

Both of the poems in the final chapter (vv. 1–9 and 10–31 form two differing poems) are acrostic in nature, meaning that each line begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetical order. This similarity, however, does not guarantee that they are by the same author. Scholars are split on whether the two acrostic poems in chapter 31 are written by the same author. It is most often

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thought that the first nine verses were written by King Lemuel as a record of his mother’s advice or by his mother herself. Most then think that the second half of the chapter was written later by the final editor and arranged here in this way quite intentionally. Some scholars do assert that the similarities between the two poems—which we’ll explore in chapter 5—make a single author more of a possibility.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 1: Even though there are several different authors of the Proverbs, as well as final editors, what is at the center of all of the Proverbs (think back to Steinmann and Lessing’s quote in the introduction)?

Proverbs 1–9 as the Lens for Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs opens with several chapters in which wisdom plays a main role. In these first nine chapters, Solomon contrasts the way of wisdom and the way of folly, with this contrast most clearly embodied by the figures of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly. The way of wisdom is the way of Yahweh; the way of folly is the way of other gods, or the way that rejects Yahweh and His gifts.

Solomon opens his initial section of writings (chs. 1–9) with a thesis statement of sorts. The goal of his writings is instruction in wisdom. While this is written as the opening for the initial section of Solomon’s writings, it stands also as the thesis of the Book of Proverbs as a whole, from the more poetic imagery of Solomon’s initial Proverbs to the short sayings to the final acrostic poems.

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,
to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:1–7)

Solomon is not talking about just any wisdom here. He is talking about the deep riches of the wisdom of God that come only to those who “fear Yahweh.” This wisdom from Yahweh instructs a person in righteousness and shapes the whole of their lives. This wisdom given by Yahweh leads to life, and those who reject it lead to their own deaths. In verses 20–33 of chapter 1, wisdom is personified and speaks. At the end of this section, she offers a warning that will echo throughout this section and beyond:

Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the Lord,
would have none of my counsel
and despised all my reproof,
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way,
and have their fill of their own devices.
For the simple are killed by their turning away,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but whoever listens to me will dwell secure
and will be at ease, without dread of disaster. (Proverbs 1:29–33)

As chapters 1–9 unfold, they build on this personification of wisdom and the two paths: the way of wisdom, which leads to life, and the way of folly, which leads to death. This comparison between the two ways culminates in chapter 9, where Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly are most directly contrasted. Those who come in to Lady Wisdom eat and live, but those who come in to feast on the food of Dame Folly “are in the depths of Sheol” (Proverbs 9:18).

The rest of the Proverbs should be read in light of the two possible ways in life. For those who fear Yahweh and are beckoned by His wisdom, the words of even the shorter Proverbs hold promise and warning. For those who do not fear Yahweh, these words are not understandable, and they will be the drunkards and the fools of which the Proverbs speak, ultimately walking the path to death. In the end, all people will embrace either Yahweh or other gods.

Later in this study, we’ll look at how closely Proverbs 31:10–31 connects to these first nine chapters and the themes set up within them.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION 2:** What are the two ways (as personified by two women)