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— March 2007 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
February	No readings	No Scripture readings
1-2 Mar	Hezekiah's Solomon collection (cont'd)	Proverbs 28:1-11
3-4 Mar	Hezekiah's Solomon collection (cont'd)	Proverbs 28:12-29:2
5-6 Mar	Hezekiah's Solomon collection (cont'd)	Proverbs 29:3-14
7-8 Mar	Hezekiah's Solomon collection (cont'd)	Proverbs 29:15-27
9 Mar	Introduction to the concluding sections of Proverbs	No Scripture readings
10-14 Mar	Confession of Agur	Proverbs 30:1-14
15-20 Mar	Numerical sayings	Proverbs 30:15-33
21-24 Mar	Words of King Lemuel from his mother	Proverbs 31:1-9
25-31 Mar	The virtuous wife	Proverbs 31:10-31

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Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

Second Part of Hezekiah Collection Mostly Antithetical (Proverbs 28:1-11) March 1-2

As earlier noted in regard to the Hezekiah collection of Solomonic proverbs (Proverbs 25–29), the first part (25–27) contains mostly synonymous proverbs, while the second part (28–29), which we are now reading, contains mostly antithetical proverbs contrasting the righteous with the wicked.

17. *A Life of Fear (28:1)*

“TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB” (*NAC*). This verse speaks of one’s way of life determining his mental outlook. The wicked, some afflicted by a guilty conscience and fearing consequences and others just chalking life up to whim and chance, live with uncertainty and perhaps even paranoia. The righteous, on the other hand, knowing that God is ultimately in charge and that they are in His care, face life with faith and confidence.

18. *Civil Unrest Evil Causes vs. Righteous Stability (28:2)*

“TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB” (*NAC*). Most commentators take many rulers here as a reference to a succession of many rulers—one after the other—over a short time due to a period of political instability. This certainly happened to Israel and Judah because of unrighteousness. Some, however, see the rulers here as many governors or overlords ruling simultaneously, increasing the burden on the people—the idea being bloated government. Since the contrast is with justice being prolonged—as a mark of stability—the former explanation seems to fit better.

19. *Oppression, Keeping in the Right Way, and the Law (28:3-11)*

“TYPE: PARALLEL.... These verses set up a parallel with an extra verse on the law in the middle of the parallel, as follows:

“A: Oppression of the poor (v. 3)

“B: The law (v. 4)

“C: Understanding or not understanding justice (v. 5)

“D: Poor can be better than rich (v. 6)

“B: The law (v. 7)

“A: Oppression of the poor (v. 8)

“B: The law (v. 9)

“C: The right path (v. 10)

“D: Poor can be smarter than rich (v. 11)” (*NAC*).

The language of the first line of verse 3 is disputed. The New King James presents “a poor man who oppresses the poor.” Others contend that this should be translated “A poor man and one who oppresses the poor.” Alternatively, the line could perhaps mean that a man is poor who oppresses the poor. This would fit the imagery of the second line—a driving rain that leaves no crops. Consider a landlord or employer oppressing his workers so much that they cease to produce for him—or big businesses or abusive governments extorting from the common people to the point that the people can no longer buy enough goods or pay sufficient taxes to support the economy or government. This corresponds to verse 8, which says that the person who abuses others financially is gathering not ultimately for himself but for those who will treat the poor properly. That is, those who treat the poor well are the ones who will end up with all the material blessings in the end. To some extent, this is true during this lifetime, but in an ultimate sense it applies to the inheritance of the righteous at the end of the age.

Verse 6 is one of the proverbs of Hezekiah’s Solomonic collection that are very similar in meaning to verses in the major Solomonic collection (see 19:1).

The next verse, 28:7, warning that a companion of gluttons shames his father, recalls 23:20-25 from the Words of the Wise.

Proverbs 28:9 says that if people won’t listen to God, then He won’t listen to them. Indeed, their prayer is an arrogant affront to Him. He considers it loathsome—just as He looks on their other displays of worship (compare 15:8).

The warning against leading the upright astray in 28:10 resembles Jesus' warning against causing His disciples to sin in Matthew 18:6. This is looked on in the proverb as an entrapment, with the perpetrator falling into his own pit, similar to Proverbs 26:27.

For 28:11, the NIV has: "A rich man may be wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has discernment sees through him." As *The New American Commentary* notes: "In this context the idea probably is that the wealthy think that their money proves they are smarter and morally superior, but the poor see that they are just more ruthless."

Hezekiah's Solomonic Collection Continued (Proverbs 28:12–29:2)

March 3-4

20. Various Proverbs (28:12–29:27)

The remainder of Hezekiah's collection of proverbs by Solomon concerns "the general health of society. The text emphasizes the need for moral leadership, decries all attempts at easy money, and stresses the need to maintain the fundamental institutions of society...."

"(1) Good Government and Bad Government I (28:12).... TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB" (*NAC*). Here we see the righteous rejoicing contrasted with the wicked arising. In context, the righteous rejoicing has to do with them having a reason to rejoice—that being that righteousness is prevailing in society, as opposed to the contrast where wickedness is prevailing. To reflect this idea, some versions use the word "triumph" instead of rejoice—this being the reason for the exultation. Contrariwise, when the wicked take charge of society, people make themselves scarce to avoid suffering abuse and exploitation. This verse corresponds to similar language in verse 28 and 29:2.

"(2) Turning From Sin (28:13-14).... TYPE: THEMATIC" (*NAC*). Verse 13 shows the importance of admitting guilt. Yet it also shows that it's not enough to merely confess our sins. We must also *forsake* them—that is, turn our lives around in repentance. In verse 14, the word rendered "reverent" in the NKJV actually means "in dread"—probably in the sense of being fearful of consequences. Besides the religious meaning here, there may also be a general societal application to these verses—those who are quick to confess mistakes or even crimes remorsefully, making changes with appropriate fear of consequences, are more likely to obtain mercy from others in various settings, whether social, employment or court.

"(3) Tyranny (28:15-16).... TYPE: THEMATIC....

"(4) Guilt and Innocence (28:17-18).... TYPE: THEMATIC" (*NAC*). Verse 17 concerns a murderer trying to escape but not succeeding. The statement "Let no one help him" does not mean that we should not help murderers in any way. After all, we should try to help all sinners admit guilt and come to repentance. The point is that we should not help them in their flight—either supporting their attempt to run from justice or aiding them in their mental flight from guilt by seeking to make them feel better about what they've done.

"(5) Prosperity by Fair Means and Foul (28:19-27).... TYPE: THEMATIC.... While not condemning possessions in themselves, Proverbs always rejects greed. It contrasts financial prudence, diligence, and generosity with the desire for quick and easy money. Greed can be manifested in unrealistic business enterprises (v. 19), accepting bribes (v. 21) [though there is some question on the point of this verse], ingratiating oneself with powerful people (v. 23), taking from one's parents (v. 24), and general greediness (vv. 22, 25)" (*NAC*).

Verse 19 is one of the proverbs of the Hezekiah collection that are close in wording or meaning to verses in the main Solomonic collection (compare 12:11).

Proverbs 28:20 warns against hastening to be rich. One major problem here, as verse 22 shows, is that a person engaged in this pursuit has an "evil eye"—being self-absorbed when it comes to money. Recall 23:6, where the NKJV has "miser" when the literal meaning, as the margin shows, is "one who has an evil eye" (compare 22:9, where words literally meaning "good eye" are translated as "generous eye"). This self-focus leads a person to disregard others, to not care if he is taking advantage of them. Pursuing quick and easy money is also a sign of folly in that one is trying to circumvent the principles of hard work and patience laid out in many proverbs. This sooner or later leads to poverty.

The point of verse 21 is disputed. Some see the verse as showing partiality resultant from a very small bribe. Others maintain that the point is that judges not show partiality to the rich in a dispute with the poor as the poor may be acting out of desperation. Still others argue that the point is for judges to not show partiality to the poor—that despite their regrettable circumstances the law must be upheld.

In verse 24, the one who says there's nothing wrong with having robbed his parents perhaps maintains this on the grounds that he will receive an inheritance eventually anyway—or perhaps he simply sees it as something his parents would never seek to punish him over. Yet the verse goes on to label the offender as companion to a destroyer (see the similar phrase in 18:9). This is essentially saying that the son is among those who tear down society. Moreover, if one would treat his own parents this way, how will he treat the rest of society?

Verse 27 shows that those who give to others in need will not lack. On a merely human level, generous people are better liked, which serves for advancement in life, and when generous people themselves suffer need, others come to their aid. Furthermore, of course, God rewards the kindnesses we show others. As to those who shut their eyes to the needs of the poor, they will also not suffer lack—of curses, that is! As with the positive result, this negative one is partially because of people's natural reaction and partially because of God's intervention.

“(6) Good Government and Bad Government II (28:28–29:2).... TYPE: THEMATIC, INCLUSIO.... The verses echo 28:12.” Between the framing verses contrasting wicked and righteous rule (28:28; 29:2), 29:1 assures that those who persist in wickedness will ultimately fall. This is because they stubbornly refuse to change—illustrating the importance of heeding rebukes when given.

Hezekiah's Solomonic Collection Continued (Proverbs 29:3-14)

March 5-6

“(7) Squandering Wealth and Squandering a Nation (29:3-4).... TYPE: PARALLEL.... In both [of these proverbs]...lust or greed destroys a heritage” (NAC).

“(8) Beware of the Traps (29:5-6).... TYPE: THEMATIC” (NAC). Flattery in verse 5 refers to praising another, often falsely, when the real objective is to promote oneself. It is not clear from the wording of the second line if the flatterer entraps the one he flatters or himself, as both ideas would seem to be true (see also 26:28). Verse 6 is usually translated to mean that an evil person is snared by his own sin. However, *The New American Commentary* says it should be translated, “There is a snare in an evil man's iniquity...” This could refer to a wicked person's self-entrapment, but it could also be a warning to the righteous against joining the wicked in their sin—with the second colon in either case showing the joyful outcome of the righteous escaping the snare of evil.

“(9) Concern for Justice (29:7).... TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB....

“(10) Order in the Court and in Society (29:8-11).... TYPE: PARALLEL, CATCHWORD.... Verse 7, since it concerns justice for the weak, may serve as a heading to this set of proverbs. The proverbs of this collection parallel each other as follows:

“A Mockers create havoc; the wise restore order (v. 8).

“B The wise have decorum at court; fools do not (v. 9)

“A' Violent men hate the good; the just seek justice for them (v. 10)

“B' The wise have self-control; fools do not (v. 11).

“The unity of this text is indicated by the presence of catchwords arranged in a chiasmic sequence” (NAC)—compare “wise” and “foolish” (v. 9) to “fool” and “wise” (v. 11) as well as “men [*enoshi*] of scorn” (v. 8, *The Interlinear Bible*) to “men [*enoshi*] of blood” (v. 10, *The Interlinear Bible*).

“(11) The Throne Secured by Righteousness (29:12-14).... TYPE: THEMATIC, INCLUSIO.... Two proverbs on integrity in royal government sandwich a proverb on the poor and their oppressors here. In turn there is a kind of progression. A proverb that mentions wicked officials is followed by one that refers to the oppressors of the poor, which in turn is followed by a third on the need of the king to protect the poor from oppression” (NAC).

The Expositor's Bible Commentary explains verse 12 this way: “Once a ruler begins to listen to lies, his court will be corrupted. The point is...that courtiers adjust themselves to the prince...—when they see that deception and court flattery win the day, they learn how the game is played” (note on verse 12). The contrast in verse 14 is the king who judges with truth.

Verse 13, which declares that God is the source of life and consciousness for both the poor and the oppressor, is identical in meaning to 22:2 in the major Solomonic collection. Besides making the point that all are equal before God, the words here are meant to comfort the downtrodden and alarm the oppressors. God naturally cares about those He has made—yet those who abuse His gift of life are still dependent on Him for existence and had better heed all that He has to say (or else!).

End of Hezekiah's Solomonic Collection (Proverbs 29:15-27)**March 7-8**

“(12) Discipline at Home and in the Nation (29:15-18). . . . TYPE: PARALLEL. . . . Discipline must be maintained at home and in society at large. In this parallel text vv. 15, 17 concern the former, and vv. 16, 18 concern the latter” (NAC).

The first line of verse 18 is perhaps best known by its King James Version rendering: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Read this way, the verse is often thought to mean that if people have no forward outlook or personal goals, they are doomed. While true in principle (and the principle can even be inferred here), the King James wording does not precisely convey the sense of the verse in the Hebrew. The New King James rendering is better: “Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint.” The word for “vision” or “revelation” is used elsewhere in Scripture for a direct prophetic revelation from God (e.g., 1 Samuel 3:1; Isaiah 1:1; Ezekiel 12:27; Daniel 1:17; 8:13; Nahum 1:1; Habakkuk 1:1). This need not refer to prophets speaking for God at a particular time. It could refer to the people not being aware of or not having access to God’s prophetic messages in Scripture. And the word rendered “cast off restraint” is also translated this way in Exodus 32:25, where the Israelites sank into sinful rebellion during Moses’ absence. The New Century Version translates the first line of the proverb as, “Where there is no word from God, people are uncontrolled.” The New Living Translation says, “When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild.” Note how being uncontrolled apart from God’s messages contrasts with the second line of the verse: “But happy is he who keeps the law.” Want to avoid miserable chaos? Then obey God’s instructions—the path to true happiness.

“(13) Controlling the Servant and Controlling the Self (29:19-22). . . . TYPE: PARALLEL [arranged in A-B-A-B form]. . . . Verses 19, 21, on controlling one’s servant, seem to have nothing to do with vv. 20, 22, on self-control. The link is the issue of control and discipline with the implication being that one must give as much attention to governing one’s own passions as to governing one’s servants” (NAC). The second colon of verse 21 is difficult because the meaning of the Hebrew word *manon*, rendered “son” in the King James and New King James, is uncertain, being found nowhere else in Scripture. The result of pampering a servant, especially in light of verse 19 (“A servant will not be corrected by mere words. . .”), is likely a negative one. Some translate *manon* to mean insolent—others as causing grief. The idea behind the translation “son” is that a possible Hebrew root of the term connotes continuance—a successor. Some accept this meaning in a negative sense—that the pampered servant ends up parading about as an inheritor of the master’s estate.

Verse 22 shares one line in common with a verse in the major Solomonic collection (15:18).

(14) The Pridful Humbled and the Humble Exalted (29:23). “TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB” (NAC). Compare Christ’s words in Matthew 23:12 (and 19:30).

(15) Complicity in Crime (29:24). “TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB” (NAC). Leviticus 5:1 says that if someone fails to give testimony when there is a legal call for it, then the silent witness will bear guilt—bringing a curse on himself. “This proverb, using the same word for oath or curse, describes someone who has befriended a thief [probably representative of any criminal], becomes aware of his wrongdoing, but remains silent when he hears a call to come forward and give evidence. He has brought a curse down on his own head” (*New American Commentary*, note on Proverbs 29:24).

(16) For Deliverance Look to God (29:25-26). “TYPE: THEMATIC” (NAC). Verse 25 says that it’s dangerous to be overly concerned about what others might think about us or do to us in the context of this book about living a righteous life. God will look out for us if we serve Him in faith (compare Psalm 118:6). Jesus also said not to fear what man can do to us (see Matthew 10:28). The next verse, Proverbs 29:26, does not mean that we should not try to get help from human authorities. The point is that we must always be looking ultimately to God to take care of us—even in matters we bring to other people. Consider Nehemiah seeking help for Jerusalem from the Persian emperor—yet praying to God all the while, knowing that God is in control of human affairs. “These two verses, coming near the end of so many proverbs on corruption and injustice in society, call the reader back to the reality that the Bible after all is not a book about social reform but calls for committed faith in Yahweh” (NAC, note on verse 26).

“(17) The Sum of It All (29:27). . . . TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB” (NAC). The Jewish *Soncino* commentary says in its note on this last verse of the Hezekiah collection of Solomon’s proverbs: “We may read into the statement the conflict of right and wrong which, throughout history, has been conspicuous in human experience. The virtuous refuse to compromise with the wicked and look upon evil

with detestation. Wrong-doers regard the upright as their natural enemies because they condemn their practices.... {This mutual hostility [*showing that the two ways of life are totally incompatible*] is the central theme of the Book, and the moral that runs through it is that the fight must continue to a finish, with victory for the righteous in the end.} With this verse, proclaiming the antagonism of vicious men towards the virtuous and the abhorrence of the evildoer by the righteous, the Book of Proverbs closes [at least as far as the collections of short, two-line sayings go]. But three addenda are appended: chapter [30], The words of Agur; [31].1-9, The words of king Lemuel [from his mother]; and [31].10-31 Praise of a woman of valor [i.e., of noble character]" (though the last section may be part of the second).

The Concluding Sections of the Book

March 9

It is possible that the last two chapters of the book of Proverbs (30–31) were an addendum to Solomon’s original book and that Hezekiah’s men or later editors inserted the Hezekiah collection before them in arrangement. Yet it could also be that the last part of the book was added after Solomon’s time—though the items here might have been part of larger collection of wisdom compiled by him. *The Zondervan NIV Study Bible* comments: “At the end of the book the editor(s) has (have) attached three additional pieces, diverse in form and content; the ‘sayings of Agur,’ the ‘sayings of King Lemuel’ and a description of a ‘wife of noble character.’ The first of these (ch. 30) is dominated by numerical proverbs (30:15, 18, 21, 24, 29...). The second (31:1-9) is devoted exclusively to instruction for kings. The third (31:10-31), effectively an epilogue to the whole, is an impressive acrostic poem honoring the wife of noble character” (introduction to Proverbs).

Some break these chapters down differently though. On one hand there are those who believe that Proverbs 30–31 should be considered as two sections (rather than as three), as indicated by the subheading of each chapter—that is, they maintain that the acrostic poem at the end of chapter 31 should be looked on as part of the sayings from Lemuel’s mother. Of course, even if that is the case, the poem is nonetheless obviously distinct from the earlier part of chapter 31 and could still serve as an epilogue to the whole book of Proverbs. On the other hand, some take the last two chapters of Proverbs to be four sections—seeing the confession of Agur (verses 1-14) as distinct from the numerical sayings (verses 15-33). Yet a distinction between these two sections of the chapter does not mean that Agur is responsible for only the first section. He could well have written all of chapter 30, and the absence of a new subheading at verse 15 would seem to bear that out (note also the “me” and “I” in verse 18). Indeed, there is a numerical element in the first part of the chapter (verse 7). Furthermore, several verses in the latter section, including the chapter’s ending verses, 32-33, are not numerical proverbs and seem to tie back to the earlier section—thus unifying the chapter. In fact, there are a number of places in both sections where a catchword is used to advance to the next segment.

Perhaps the last two chapters are best comprehended as two sections, each with two subsections—the last of which serves as an epilogue to the whole book of Proverbs. Moreover, there are several ties between the two chapters. *The NIV Application Commentary* states: “Certain similarities of theme and vocabulary suggest that the two chapters are meant to be read alongside each other.

“(1) Each chapter begins with discourse marked as an ‘oracle’ [NIV, the Hebrew term being *massa*—see more on this below] (30:1-14; 31:1-9) and ends with an artful reflection on human experience, taking the form of numerical sayings (30:15-33) and an acrostic poem (31:10-31). The ‘oracles’ are also introduced as ‘sayings’ [NIV] (lit., ‘words’) of a foreign figure [so it is supposed], either spoken by or to a ‘son’ (30:1; 31:1). The content of each first section urges temperance (30:6-10; 31:3-4), presenting prohibitions (marked by *’al*, ‘do not’) followed by a negative outcome (marked by *pen*, ‘lest’). The links at the beginning and end of this two-chapter unit put the emphasis on human response to God (30:1-9; 31:30).

“(2) The end of chapter 30 and beginning of chapter 31 are connected. The word ‘king’ is used four times at the end of chapter 30 (30:22, 27, 28, 31) and four times at the beginning of chapter 31 (31:1, 3, 4). A charge to keep silent (‘clap your hand over your mouth,’ 30:32) is followed by a charge to ‘speak up’ (lit. ‘open your mouth,’ 31:8-9). The outcome of ignoring the first charge is evil and strife (30:32-33) and the outcome of heeding the second is fair judgment (31:8-9).

“(3) We also notice similarities of image and theme, such as the adulteress who eats (with its overtones of ruin and devouring, 30:20) and women who consume strength and ruin kings (31:2-3). The contrast develops as the negative images of women in chapter 30 are answered by the positive images of

chapter 31. While Agur laments that he has not learned wisdom (30:3), the woman of 31:26 opens her mouth to teach wisdom.

“Therefore, it appears that chapters 30 and 31 are to be read together as a four-part conclusion to the book of Proverbs, just as chapters 1–9 served as its introduction. In fact, many of the figures of those chapters appear again in chapter 30: the bloodthirsty men (30:11-14; cf. 1:10-19; 2:12-15), the adulteress (30:20; cf. 2:16-19; 7:1-27), and the numerical sayings of chapter 6” (comments on Proverbs 30).

The Words of Agur the Son of Jakeh (Proverbs 30:1-14)

March 10-14

1. Confession of Agur (30:1-14)

(1) Subheading (30:1a). Just who was Agur the son of Jakeh? We really have no way of knowing. Jewish tradition and various interpreters contend that Agur is a pseudonym for Solomon, but this seems unlikely, as we will see.

Favorable to this belief is that Agur is usually translated to mean “Gatherer,” “Collector” or “Assembler”—thought to represent a teacher or perhaps the compiler of proverbs. However, the name could also denote “Gathered.” Jewish tradition (in the *Midrash Mishle*—a post-Talmudic commentary on Proverbs) is weak in this regard, as the name is identified with Hebrew *ogar*—referring to Solomon supposedly having “girt his loins” (gathered up his skirt in a stance of preparedness) with wisdom (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 1). This seems a stretch. The later interpretation “Gatherer” fits the argument better. Jakeh is typically understood to mean “Fearing” in the sense of “Reverent” or “Pious,” though a few other definitions have been put forward. Thus, Collector son Piety is thought to be Solomon the Pious—the Jewish source cited above even labeling him free from sin (at the time Proverbs was written). However, some suggest that son of Jakeh (“Pious”) refers to Solomon being the son of righteous David. We might wonder in this case why Solomon would find it necessary to use figurative names, as other sections of Proverbs bear his name. Yet he does refer to himself figuratively in Ecclesiastes as the Preacher.

Evidence arguing against Agur being Solomon, besides the lack of explicit mention of his name as in the other sections of the book, is the prayer of Proverbs 30:7-9. Here Agur asks that God give him neither poverty nor riches because of the bad result each would lead to. This request makes little sense if it were coming from Solomon. He was the wealthiest king on earth—and God promised riches to him at the very outset of his reign. Indeed, by the time he was a wisdom teacher, Solomon was exceedingly rich.

If not Solomon, then, who was Agur Bin-Jakeh? Was this his real name? It certainly could have been. Yet it is also possible that it was a figurative pseudonym for another wisdom teacher besides Solomon.

Another word we should note in verse 1 is the one mentioned above translated “his utterance” in the NKJV and “an oracle” in the NIV. The Hebrew here is *ha-massa*, literally meaning “the burden.” This word was often used by God’s prophets in the Old Testament to designate a message from God that they bore—some think a weighty or heavy saying. *Midrash Mishle* proposes, probably in error, that the term is used here because Solomon bore the yoke of God (in generally serving and obeying Him). It is possible that Agur realized that he bore a message from God—or that later editors realized it and added the word. It is even possible that Agur was a prophet. However, the word *massa* is also used in reference to the message of King Lemuel from his mother in Proverbs 31:1. Yet there it occurs without the definite article (the), and some see in the term not a message but the name of the country of which Lemuel was king—especially as one of Ishmael’s sons was named Massa (Genesis 25:13-16; 1 Chronicles 1:29-31) and Assyrian records refer to an Arabian tribe by this name. Some maintain that Agur was also from this land of Massa, as the word occurs in Proverbs 30:1. The lack of the definite article in 31:1, however, does not necessitate *massa* being a national name there. It could still simply mean “burden,” or message, as we will see when we come to it. Moreover, the fact that the definite article does occur with the word in 30:1 seems to argue against this being the name of a country.

• **Subheading Continued or Opening Statement? (30:1b).** What about the latter part of verse 1? The New King James Version, following the Masoretic Text, renders it: “This man declared to Ithiel—to Ithiel and Ucal.” These are often regarded as Agur’s pupils, about whom nothing else is known—just as with Agur himself. Ithiel is a name that occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament (see Nehemiah 11:7). It means “God Is With Me.” Ucal is not attested to elsewhere, but it would mean “I Am Strong” or “I Will

Prevail.” Some, it should be noted see these as figurative names for Jesus Christ—related to the mention of God’s Son in verse 4—and that the *l’*- here before Ithiel should be translated “of” rather than “to.” But this seems to be reading too much into these words. The Greek Septuagint translation gives a variant reading of this sentence in which no names appear at all. If correct, it would mean that the vowel pointing of the Masoretic Text needs slight emending here. A number of scholars favor the variant rendering because the back-to-back repetition of Ithiel as a name would be unusual and because the variant fits the context of the verses that follow. This alternate reading is given in the margin of the NIV: “[This man] declared, ‘I am weary, O God; / I am weary, O God, and faint’— reading *la’ithi ‘El* instead of *l’Ithi’el* and reading *va’ekel* instead of *v’Ukal* (and reading *’ekel* as coming from the root *kalah*, meaning “to be finished,” “exhausted,” “dying,” “consumed”).

(2) Prologue: “The Limits of Human Understanding (30:1b-6).... TYPE: WISDOM TEXT PROLOGUE” (*NAC*). The author’s declaration of ignorance in verses 2-3 is literary hyperbole. It should not be taken too literally or else this work should not have been included in the book of Proverbs. Furthermore, Agur shows in verses 5-6 and other verses to follow that he does have knowledge of God and His words. His statement, then, must mean that he is at a loss. He is stumped. “With the suggested reading for v. 1b above [about being weary], the meaning is that he has struggled to come to an understanding of the truth, and he must confess that he has reached his limit.... It is...both an acknowledgment of the limits of human understanding and a humble confession that only God is truly wise” (*New American Commentary*, note on verses 2-3).

In verse 4, Agur presents a series of rhetorical questions. Some see these as a poetic way of referring to God and His greatness—this being what has left Agur at a loss. Yet it should not be so hard to come up with God’s name, as it is revealed throughout Scripture (the name *YHWH*, meaning the Eternal or Self-Existent One, is even used by Agur in verse 9). The Son’s name is, of course, a different matter, and this has been explained in various ways. The Jewish Misrashic interpretation was that it referred to Israel. Christian interpreters have often argued that it refers explicitly to Jesus Christ. Some have said that it refers to any disciple of God’s wisdom.

Yet there may be another way to look at these verses. Some contend that the passage is meant not merely to show God’s greatness as an explanation for what has stumped Agur, but to point out that Agur’s difficulty is not unique since *no human being* has the full wisdom and understanding to comprehend God, as no one but Him has experienced the breadth of the universe or harnessed the full power of nature. In this interpretation, the rhetorical challenge to the reader is to come up with some person who has: “What is his name...if you know?” Clearly, only God fits the bill here—yet the idea might be, “Who, *besides* God, fits this description?” But, in that case, what is the point of saying, “...and what is his son’s name...?” Some see the whole question this way in context: “All right, let’s hear it. Come up with some all-wise, all-powerful wisdom teacher. Who is he? Prove there is such a person by naming his son (his student who is a product of his teachings).” Seen this way, the idea appears to be that no such person or son exists.

However, there could well be more implied. After all, if the “who” here is a hypothetical person being measured against God, then would not the comparison include the matter of having a son? God Himself does have children who are His disciples. Agur himself was a student of God’s wisdom—yet he lamented his own lack of understanding. That brings us to the fact that God has a perfect Son, Jesus Christ, who also has the wisdom and power described here. The terminology of ascending into heaven and descending was even used of Christ in the Gospel of John (3:13, 31-33). Through God’s inspiration, Agur could well have been referring to Christ even if he did not understand the matter himself. Interestingly, Christ bears the name “Word of God,” and God’s Word (His revelation to man) is the subject of the next verse in Proverbs 30.

Verse 5 shows that God’s Word, rather than limited human wisdom, is perfect and reliable as a source of truth and help. And verse 6 warns against adding to God’s words (compare Deuteronomy 12:32; Revelation 22:18). As verse 6 of Proverbs 30 is Agur’s first imperative (words spoken in the form of a command), some see a new segment here, albeit one connected to verse 5 through the catchword “words.” In any case, verse 6 can imply more than just making up prophetic messages or false Scripture. The warning includes the danger of dogmatic pronouncements about what God says when these are based on stretched interpretations of revelation from Him—for instance, claiming Scripture means specific things

that go far beyond what is written. We are not to put words in God's mouth, as it were; these may turn out to be false, making us liars.

(3) A Prayer for Truth and Sufficient Blessing (30:7-9).... "TYPE: NUMERICAL SAYING, PRAYER" (NAC). Agur now turns in prayer to God—"lies" in this unit (see verse 7) being the catchword in advancing from the previous unit (see verse 6). *The NIV Application Commentary* says: "God's words are true, but human words can prove false. So the speaker offers the first prayer recorded in the book, making two requests of God: to keep falsehood and lies [whether from others or oneself] at bay and to provide daily bread (Prov. 30:8; cf. Ex. 16:1-36). If there is too much, one can forget God in pride (cf. Deut. 8:10-18); if there is too little, one may forget God's commands and steal (cf. Prov. 6:30-31)" (note on 30:6-10). Verse 9 shows concern for God's reputation, instead of merely personal need, as the main reason for the requests here.

(4) Don't Impugn a Servant to His Master (30:10). "TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB" (NAC). The meaning of this proverb rests mostly on the definition of the word translated "malign" in the New King James Version. It may follow thematically (like an advancing catchword) from "profane" in verse 9, where the idea is to use God's name unwarrantably. The word used in verse 10 means to speak bad about—to accuse. But an accusation can be true or false. Many take it here to specifically mean saying something false—slander. The Jewish *Soncino* commentary says, "Whereas slandering any person is a reprehensible act, it is especially vile when the victim is a slave, who is helpless and will not be believed when he denies the accusation" (note on verse 10). In this interpretation, the rest of the verse is understood to mean that one is then subject to a deserved curse called forth of God by the victimized person—or somehow the lie is exposed and the liar is found guilty (or will be in the end).

However, others take the verse as a warning against telling a master anything negative about his servant even if it's true. The thought here is that the servant, who has his master's ear, can verbally retaliate against the accuser and lead to the accuser being found guilty in some way. In biblical times, a servant would have worked in a master's home or in his fields. So the caution, it is thought in this case, is against meddling in someone else's domestic situation—though it could perhaps apply today in not interfering in an employer-employee work relationship (compare Proverbs 26:17). If this is intended, it would be, as with other proverbs, a general principle rather than a hard and fast rule. For there could well be circumstances where the overriding law of love for neighbor might require you to inform an employer about some problem with an employee.

Yet there could be another interpretation of the words here in context. Consider the parallel construction of verse 6. In parallel, the "he" who might curse in verse 10 would be the master—just as God would rebuke in verse 6. Also note that in Agur's prayer (verses 7-9), he is concerned to not "profane the name of my God." Agur is here bearing a "burden" (verse 1), a weighty message—as the servant of God, it would seem. It may be that Agur is in verse 10 using a general proverb in a more specific sense of warning people against maligning him, God's servant, lest God curse them. Note that he follows in succeeding verses with issues of societal guilt. The point of verse 10 in context could be that people had better not accuse him before God over what he is about to pronounce, since he is bearing God's message.

(5) Four Evils in Society (30:11-14). "TYPE: THEMATIC, CATCHWORD" (NAC). The word "curses" in verse 11 shows a link with verse 10. There is some debate over the meaning of the repeated word "generation" in verses 11-14—whether it refers to everyone living at a given time, to a particular age group or to a class of people. Four dangerous social ills are listed here: dishonoring of parents (verse 11); self-righteous hypocrisy (verse 12); arrogant pride (verse 13); and plundering of the poor and needy (verse 14). Perhaps this is simply a group of sayings about how evil society is. The words may have been leveled at the people of Agur's own day, yet some have labeled the message a prophecy of the last days in line with 2 Timothy 3:1-7. Of course, these conditions have existed throughout human history—but they will sink to their lowest point in the last generation before Christ's return. It is interesting to note that there are four items here, since the next section in Proverbs 30, the numerical sayings, contains five lists of four. It may be that this list of societal ills is meant to introduce the numerical sayings—to point out the need of the society to hear the wisdom teaching that follows. Indeed, some of the things addressed in the next section are closely related to problems listed here—such as dishonoring of parents in verse 17 and pride in verse 32 (we will also note verses 15 and 20 in this regard in comments below).

“There Are Three Things...Yes, Four” (30:15-33)**March 15-20**

Most of the numerical proverbs here list four items with the formula “three...yes, four.” As noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on an earlier numerical proverb, 6:16-19, this kind of numerical progression enhances the poetry of a given saying, serves as a memory aid, builds to a climax and implies that there are numerous examples of the subject that could be given—the ones listed being only a representative few (compare also Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6).

(6) The Bloodsucker’s Two Daughters and Four Insatiable Things (30:15-16). “TYPE: NUMERICAL SAYING, RIDDLE.... Verse 15a, although actually a separate numerical saying [using the number two] from vv. 15b-16 [listing four items with the formula “three...four”], is linked to it by the common theme of insatiability. Also the numerical pattern of the two sayings together is 2-3-4, and this also serves to hold the whole unit together” (*NAC*).

A leech (“horseleach” in the KJV) is literally a bloodsucking worm—though some, based on linguistics and Middle Eastern traditions, have thought that the word *‘alukah* here could refer to a demonic ghoul or vampire. There are, of course, no real vampires as portrayed in folklore and horror stories. Yet there have been, and still are, demonically influenced people who act like vampires. On the other hand, the idea here could be one of using a popular myth to make a moral point (implying nothing about the reality of the mentioned creature).

For those who understand the word in question to mean the parasitic worm, the two “daughters”—either each named “Give” or each crying “Give!” (always wanting more)—are typically thought to be the leech’s two suckers, one at each end. While “daughters” perhaps seems an odd figurative label for the mouths of a creature, we might consider this a reversed form of the modern metaphor of referring to children as mouths to feed. Accepting this interpretation, some see the verse as a simple observation about something in nature that is not satisfied—parallel to other items that follow.

Yet the word “leech” could probably refer figuratively to a type of person—just as it does today. Even if something like “vampire” is intended, the usage would still almost certainly be figurative in the same way the word leech could be—the reference in either case being to a “bloodsucking person,” one who greedily abuses others in taking from them, or even a “bloodthirsty” person who would kill others. Indeed, note again the description in the previous verse of people “whose teeth are like swords, and whose fangs are like knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, and the needy from among men.” These could be the vampires or leeches in mind in verse 15 (and this would be a thematic advancement from verse 14, similar to catchword advancements elsewhere in the chapter). In line with this interpretation, “daughters” could refer to the circumstances leechlike or bloodsucking people give birth to—others *giving* and *giving still more* (as the demand is never satisfied).

The New American Commentary says that “verses 15b-16 comprise a riddle. Although it is fairly easy to establish in what sense each of the four things is insatiable, the real question is what might be the reason this list is here at all.... The most reasonable solution [this commentary concludes] is that all serve as metaphors for the insatiably greedy or parasitic people” (note on verses 15-16). Some have noted in this regard that the images of the grave (similar to Proverbs 27:20) and devouring fire portray the parasitic people as menacing, while the barren womb and parched ground make them look desperate. On the other hand, the list of four things that are never satisfied here—death, barrenness, lack and fiery destruction—could conceivably be presented as ironic judgments on the never-satisfied, greedy people. Either way, note the *A-B-B-A* chiasmic arrangement of these four items.

“(7) The Fate of the Parent-Hater (30:17).... TYPE: INDIVIDUAL SAYING.... This verse conspicuously looks back to v. 11 (as perhaps vv. 15-16 look back to v. 14)” (*NAC*). In this graphic warning, those who are disobedient to parents end up as carrion for birds. This could imply a violent death away from home, falling in the open, so that their bodies are not buried quickly or cared for. Or it might imply some sort of public punishment such as hanging or impalement, with the body left exposed in the open as an example and warning to others. Those who shun parental discipline, getting into all sorts of trouble, are more likely to meet with such consequences. Recall that obedience to parents is a prescription for long life (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). Interestingly, the Bible elsewhere warned in similar terms of ancient and future destruction on rebellious generations defying God, their supreme Parent (see Jeremiah 7:33; 15:3; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20; Ezekiel 29:5; 32:4; 39:4, 17; Revelation 19:17, 21).

The mention of eagles in Proverbs 30:17 serves as a catchword link to the next segment (verses 18-20), which mentions an eagle.

(8) Four Awesome Ways and an Awful Way (30:18-20).... TYPE: NUMERICAL SAYING, [CATCHWORD,] RIDDLE” (NAC). The word in verse 18 translated “wonderful” in the NKJV is used in the sense of invoking wonder—“amazing” (NIV). The four aspects of nature to follow are very mysterious—beyond the author’s comprehension. This perhaps ties back to Agur’s opening prologue expressing the limits of his own human understanding when faced with God’s greatness (verses 1-6).

As to what the four “ways” (courses of action) here have in common, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* notes: “Suggestions for a common theme include the following: all four things are hidden from continued observation, for they are there in majestic form and then are gone, not leaving a trace [that is, none leaves a track that can be readily followed]; they all have a mysterious means of propulsion or motivation; they all describe the movement of one thing within the sphere or domain of another; or the first three serve as illustrations of the fourth and greatest wonder—it concerns human relations and is slightly different than the first three” (note on verses 18-19).

The NIV Application Commentary observes that the first three name the elements of creation (heavens, earth and sea) and points out that each named traveler makes its way through its part of the created order—the implication being that the last course listed is within the bounds of proper domain as well. There are those who see the male-female relationship here as an illicit one (a one-night stand leaving no trace) parallel to that in the verse that follows (verse 20), but it seems much more likely that the relationship at the end of verse 19 is meant in a positive sense—the course of true love (which is difficult to trace)—and that the one in verse 20 contrasts with it.

More specifically regarding the relations at the end of verse 19, which does seem to be the main focus in the list, “the term ‘*almah*’ (‘maiden’ [NIV]) does not in and of itself mean ‘virgin’ [as in the NKJV] but rather describes a young woman who is sexually ready for marriage. What is in view here is the wonder of human sexuality, for the [Hebrew] preposition *be* suggests that the ‘way of a man’ is either ‘with’ or ‘in’ the ‘*almah*. This mystery might begin with the manner of obtaining the love of the woman but focuses on the most intimate part of human relationships. So the most intimate moments of love are at the heart of what the sage considers to be wonderful” (same note). *The Zondervan NIV Study Bible* says that the reference is probably to “the mystery of courting and how it leads to consummation” (note on verse 19). This theme is well illustrated in the Song of Solomon.

Verse 20 is related to the verses before, as it likewise uses the catchword “way” and concerns sexual relations—in this case out of step with the created order. As *Expositor’s* comments: “Equally amazing is the insensitivity of the adulteress to sin. That this verse was placed here lends support to the idea that the previous verse is focusing on sexual intimacy in marriage; for just as that is incomprehensible (filling one with wonder), so is the way that human nature has distorted and ruined it.... The portrayal is one of an amoral woman more than an immoral one.... The act of adultery is as unremarkable to her as a meal.... [It could be pertinent that] the imagery of eating and wiping her mouth is euphemistic for sexual activity (see 9:17). It is incredible that human beings can engage in sin and then so easily dismiss any sense of guilt or responsibility, perhaps by rationalizing the deeds or perhaps through a calloused indifference to what the will of the Lord is for sexuality” (note on verse 20). This attitude may well refer back to verse 12 concerning the generation pure in its own eyes while not washed from its filth.

“(9) Four Unbearable People (30:21-23).... TYPE: NUMERICAL SAYING [WITH CATCHWORD]” (NAC). In this third of the “three-four” sayings, the Hebrew word *tahat*, meaning “under,” is repeated four times. The NKJV translates this word as “for” in verses 21-22 and gives no word for it where it occurs at the beginning of verse 23. It is stated in these verses that the earth is perturbed and cannot bear up under what is listed here. “Just as the ‘way of an adulteress’ (30:20) is out of step with the created order of wisdom, so the four items listed threaten to overturn that order. In ancient Near Eastern thinking, the earth shakes when the natural order is disturbed” (*NIV Application Commentary*, note on verses 21-23). Observe the parallelism in that the first two items concern men and the last two concern women.

The first, second and fourth upheavals here in the proper order of things are fairly clear: “The servant, the fool, and the maidservant are all in unexpected positions of power” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 21-23). The first case is problematic because “a servant who gains authority over others has neither the training nor disposition to rule well” (*New American Commentary*, note on verses 21-23). He

doesn't know what he's doing and may rush into abusing his authority. We saw this as a problem earlier in 19:10. That same verse also cautioned against luxury for a fool (compare also Ecclesiastes 10:5-7)—similar to the second listed item in Proverbs 30:22. A fool who is well-fed has too much time on his hands—allowing him to be all the more insufferable to others. Compare also the danger even for a wise person of too much food and luxury in verses 8-9. The problem in a female servant succeeding her mistress (i.e., the woman she previously served) is thought to either mean her inability to properly handle her elevation in stature (as in the first example) or her displacing, in favor and position, one who is already the master's wife. Some point here to the gloating of Hagar when she became pregnant by Abraham, thereby upsetting Sarah and causing a household rift (see Genesis 16).

The third listed item is disputed. Note the word “hateful” in the New King James Version—following the King James Version “odious” (arousing or deserving of hatred). While some other versions translate the word similarly, various others translate the word as “hated” or, in paraphrase, “unloved.” In the second interpretation (hated or unloved), the reference is thought to be to a married woman who is unloved to start with (such as Jacob's wife Leah) or one who is no longer loved—the upheaval being her constant mourning, bitterness or even rage, the latter perhaps evoking to us the modern proverb, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned” (adapted from a line in a 17th-century play by William Congreve). Some who support this interpretation see the following chiasmic arrangement in the four items here:

“A: Male servant becomes king.

“B: Male fool is sated with food.

“B': Female is deprived of love.

“A': Female servant becomes mistress” (NAC).

However, this is probably incorrect. Note that the two center items here are thematic opposites of one another. And recall the statement above that the first, second and fourth items all speak of people being raised to unexpected positions. If the word in the third item is translated “hateful” (as in the NKJV) or “loathsome” (as in the Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh*), then the four items would be arranged in straight four-line parallelism—since this woman getting married would be another surprising elevation:

1. Male servant becomes king.
2. Male fool is sated with food.
3. Female repugnant person becomes married.
4. Female servant becomes mistress.

Note that there may be some chiasm here in that the outer two lines concern the elevation of a servant while the inner two concern the elevation of a fool or repugnant person (which may be equated). The upheaval in the case of a hateful woman marrying should be obvious, especially given other verses we've seen about the contentious wife (19:13; 21:9, 19; 27:15). If a horrible woman manages to get married, husband and household look out (as well as extended family, neighbors and friends besides)—it's going to be a rough ride for all. Perhaps she is related in theme to the adulterous woman of the previous segment (verse 20) and the women who sap strength from kings and ruin them in the next chapter (31:3)—and serves as a contrast to the noble wife given later in the next chapter (31:10-31).

(10) Four Small but Wise Creatures (30:24-28). TYPE: NUMERICAL SAYING. This particular listing lacks the formula of “three-four”—only mentioning “four.” The unit “is connected with the preceding by the catchwords ‘four’ and ‘earth’ in their title lines (vv. 21, 24), by ‘food’ in their second verses (vv. 22, 25), and by ‘king’ in vv. 22 [NIV], 27 and v. 28” (*New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, note on verses 24-28).

The little animals here provide important lessons for human beings about surviving wisely despite severe limitations. The repetition in verses 25-26 of “people” or “folk”—each a translation of the same Hebrew word *am*—and “king” in verses 27-28 “signals that these small creatures teach great lessons about being a people, asking ancient readers: ‘What kind of people do you want to be—strong, led by a king? (cf. 30:29-31). You don't need that as much as you need wisdom” (*NIV Application Commentary*, note on verses 24-28). Perhaps this is addressing the wayward generation or generations Agur refers to in verses 11-14—or is meant as a contrast.

As to the specific lessons, the ants, disciplined and industrious, prudently prepare in good times for the hard times (compare 6:6-8). The rock badgers (hyraxes or conies) choose wise shelter, providing for personal security. The locusts, with no king, succeed through unity, organization and cooperation.

The last creature is disputed. Some say a spider is meant—others a lizard. The KJV and NKJV are probably incorrect in saying that this creature grasps with its hands as the implied means of its success (allowing it to walk on walls and ceilings), as that does not follow the pattern of the other listed items wherein the initial colon concerns a weakness. Other translations (such as the NIV) say that the creature can be caught (or crushed) with the hands—of human beings, that is—this being the disadvantage it overcomes in nevertheless managing to evade even royal defenses and live in palaces. In reality, such a dwelling holds no meaning for a spider or lizard. The lesson is meant for us. *The New International Commentary* notes: “This conclusion points to wisdom’s reward of living in a luxurious royal palace. If the son [or student of wisdom], whom wicked men and women want to capture, exercises caution, though as vulnerable as a lizard [or spider], he too will live in the chief residence of the realm (cf. Psalm 45). Paradoxically, the people of God who are foolish by the world’s standards live in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1)” (note on Proverbs 30:28).

(11) Four That Proceed Majestically (30:29-31). NUMERICAL SAYING. This saying is the last of the “three-four” proverbs. The catchword “king” is used to advance from the previous unit to this one. Thematically, this unit appears to be a counterpoint to the previous one. The previous unit used small creatures to show that despite powerlessness and lack of kingship, success could come through wisdom. Here, on the other hand, through the illustration of more powerful creatures, we see that there is certain value in power and authority—a grandeur that should be respected. As the animals are used to analogize human reality, the king’s royal power is the focus of the text. The word rendered “greyhound” in the KJV and NKJV is of uncertain translation. Other alternatives offered include rooster, war horse and starling. The point of the passage remains the same.

(12) Cease From Pride and Troublemaking (30:32-33). TYPE: ADMONITION, CATCHWORD. In the face of the obvious grandeur and power of royalty in verses 29-31, in this concluding unit the author (apparently still Agur) tells those who are guilty of exalting themselves and troublemaking to put their hand on their mouth, meaning stop it right then and there—before things get worse. As noted before, this may hark back to the generation lifted up with pride in verse 13, along with the other problems listed in verses 11-14. Verse 33 warns of the consequences of pride and evildoing. Though this closing admonition is not a numerical saying, it is given in a threefold formula. Each of the three lines says “churning...produces”—as the same Hebrew word is translated “churning,” “wringing” and “forcing” in the KJV and NKJV. We should also note a play on the words rendered “nose” and “wrath,” which come from the same root. The first two lines are figurative illustrations of the producing of strife in the last line. Consider that the churning of milk, initially a yielding liquid, causes a thickening that becomes harder and harder to push through—perhaps illustrating people ending up at loggerheads. And the wringing of the nose producing blood may imply that the strife of the last verse can involve bloody noses or, worse, bloodshed generally.

While this concludes chapter 30, we should recall from our opening comments on this chapter that it was likely intended to be read in conjunction with chapter 31.

The Words of King Lemuel From His Mother (Proverbs 31:1-9)

March 21-24

It was noted in previous comments that chapters 30 and 31 are two distinct but related sections, each apparently with two subsections—four parts in all. As stated before, some ties between the two chapters may indicate that they should be read together. We will note some of these again as we proceed.

1. Subheading (31:1).

As with Agur, some have thought that King Lemuel—this name meaning “Devoted to God” or “Belonging to God” (repeated in verse 4)—is a pseudonym for Solomon. Yet, as was pointed out in regard to Agur, it seems odd that Solomon would go by another name here considering the clear mentions of his name elsewhere in the book of Proverbs. It is true that he goes by the title of “Preacher” in Ecclesiastes, but his name Solomon is not used elsewhere in that book. Some argue that Proverbs 30 and 31 being separate compositions only later appended to the book of Proverbs could explain this. However, we might then wonder why the later compilers did not clarify Solomon as the author of these sections—in line with his name being used elsewhere in Proverbs (unless, of course, they did not know). Clearly, the

matter is strictly a guess either way—but an author other than Solomon seems perhaps more likely. Lemuel, like Agur, could well be a pseudonym—but not necessarily for Solomon. Perhaps it was a nickname for this king used particularly by his mother.

Some maintain that Lemuel was a foreigner. As in Proverbs 30:1, the word in 31:1 translated “utterance” in the NKJV (or “oracle” in the NIV) is *massa*—the Hebrew word meaning “burden” (used frequently by Israel’s prophets to denote a message from God, either because it was “carried” by them or was heavy or weighty). It was pointed out previously that the word occurs in 31:1 without the definite article (the), a fact some use to support this being the name of a country over which Lemuel was king—especially as there was a Massa son of Ishmael (Genesis 25:13-16; 1 Chronicles 1:29-31), whose descendants were probably the Arabian tribe of that name recorded in Assyrian documents. This opinion is buttressed by the arrangement of the words here in the original Hebrew: *dabari lemuel melek massa*—“words Lemuel king *massa*” (it being unusual to say “Lemuel King,” rather than “the-King Lemuel” or “Lemuel the-king,” unless the word to follow was the name of a land or people). However, recall the use of the definite article with *massa* (i.e., *ha-massa*) in Proverbs 30:1—which makes more sense as “the burden” (i.e., the borne or weighty message) than as the name of a country. And it is likely that *massa* is meant in the same sense in 31:1. Why, then, is there no definite article in the latter case? In the Hebrew, the adjective *asher* (meaning “that”) comes immediately after the word *massa* here, which can serve to make the sense definite rather than indefinite. The subheading should probably be read this way: “Words of Lemuel, king, a weighty message that his mother taught him.”

Of course, this gets us no closer to knowing who Lemuel was. We know only that he was a king—whether of Israel or a related people is not clear. Those who contend he was Solomon maintain that Solomon’s mother Bathsheba was the source of the instruction here. Yet again, that is indeterminate and seems unlikely. Whatever the case it was the king’s mother who taught him what is written here. Some label her the queen mother, but she could have been a lesser royal wife who died before her son ascended the throne. And Lemuel’s mother may not have actually written what we read here. Lemuel himself, or another commissioned by him, may have summarized her lifelong instructions in literary form.

How much of the chapter should be attributed to Lemuel’s mother or to one who summarized her teaching? Some regard only verses 2-9, meant specifically as instructions for a king, as constituting her counsel. They view the poem of the virtuous wife in verses 10-31 as the product of someone else entirely—an independent, concluding unit to the book of Proverbs. Yet given the absence of a new subheading at verse 10, it seems more natural to view the latter part of the chapter, even though it is unquestionably a distinct unit in itself, as the concluding part of Lemuel’s mother’s instructions—though, again, someone else could have turned her advice into the remarkable poem here. Of course, being part of Lemuel’s mother’s counsel does not preclude this poem from also being used as an epilogue or conclusion to the book of Proverbs, which it seems to be.

2. Three Requirements for Righteous Rule (31:2-9)

TYPE: ADMONITION. Chapter 30 closed with an admonition, and chapter 31 opens with one. The lessons here concern kingship. As pointed out earlier, forms of the word “king” are used four times at the end of chapter 30 (30:22, 27, 28, 31) and four times at the beginning of chapter 31 (31:1, 3, 4). “With remarkable conciseness the mother of Lemuel describes the moral requirements of good government. These lessons are, simply put: do not use your authority as a means to debauchery (v. 3), keep your head clear from the stupefying effects of alcohol (vv. 4-7), and use your power to help the powerless (vv. 8-9)” (*New American Commentary*, note on verses 2-9).

The previous admonition in chapter 30 concluded with a threefold repetition of two words, “churning...produces” (verse 33). This one opens with a threefold repetition of two words, “what...son” (31:1). The point in each statement seems to be, “What, then, am I to tell you, my son?” This is not because she is unsure. It is simply a device to call to attention—to let Lemuel know she is about to tell him something important. The phrase “son of my womb” is a term of endearment and closeness intensifying the previous phrase “my son”—and showing that she has raised him from birth. Next, “son of my vows” perhaps implies that she had made promises to God in praying for a son when she was yet without child—possibly even that she had particularly vowed Lemuel (which could explain his name, again meaning “Devoted to God”).

Proverbs 30 mentioned problem women—the adulteress and odious woman (verses 20, 23)—while Lemuel’s mother here warns her son against giving his strength to women, by which kings are destroyed (31:3). This likely pointed to kings amassing large harems as well as sleeping around outside of marriage, both of which could ruin rulers—through disease, through the squandering of national wealth and distraction from state duties, through subjecting themselves to scandal, blackmail, vengeful plotting or palace intrigue between wives trying to exalt themselves and their sons, and through moral degradation leading to other vices.

Verses 4-5 do not mean rulers should never drink alcoholic beverages. The warning is against excess, as shown by the reason given—to prevent interference with proper and just rulership. In strict moderation, alcohol does not impair judgment. Drunkenness, however, is another matter.

There is some debate over the point of verses 6-7. Some think Lemuel’s mother was saying that a king should not hoard up drink for his own use (whereby he would become drunk) but should offer it as a comfort to the suffering and needy—as God intended alcoholic beverages to cheer people up (see Psalm 104:15). The contrast with the ruler in this case would not imply that commoners are entitled to drink to excess, as other passages in the Bible show the great dangers involved in that vice (compare Proverbs 23:29-35). Also, the idea here would not be a government welfare program of free beer and wine. The statement would instead be rhetorical—to show that a king should put the needs of his subjects above his own desires for pleasure.

Other commentators, however, take a completely different view here, seeing verses 6-7 of Proverbs 31 as Lemuel’s mother telling him to leave to the lowly and downtrodden the drinking away of problems (as they are already inclined to this)—the point having already been made that this is simply not fit for a king, given his responsibilities. It should be noted in this regard that the word at the beginning of verse 6 often translated “give” could be rendered “leave.” Along these lines, *The New American Commentary* says, “The comparison to the suffering poor and to their use of alcohol is meant to awaken Lemuel to the duties that go with his class and status rather than to describe some kind of permissible drunkenness” (note on verses 4-7).

The admonition from Lemuel’s mother concludes with the charge in the next two verses. Whereas Agur’s admonition to the proud and troublemakers in 30:32 is to “put your hand on your mouth,” the mother of Lemuel twice tells him, a king who is to judge righteously, “Open your mouth” (31:8-9)—meaning “Speak out.” This terminology may have been chosen to contrast with drunkenness (verses 4-5), which also requires the opening of one’s mouth. Rather than open his mouth to drink and get drunk and thereby hurt the needy, a king should open his mouth to speak out to help the needy. For a king is supposed to serve his people.

Given the writing down and passing on of his mother’s instructions, it is obvious that King Lemuel took her words to heart. It is hoped that he came to exemplify the ideals she expressed. Yet even Solomon, the principal author of the book of Proverbs, while a wonderfully successful ruler for a time, eventually succumbed to self-indulgence and debauchery and failed in his duty to God and others. Certainly such a high degree of principled concern to rule for the good of the governed was rare among ancient Middle Eastern monarchs—and it has remained so among political leaders throughout history up to our own day. But one day a King is coming whose reign over the whole world will be characterized by perfect, altruistic care for the welfare of all subjects, including an overarching concern to provide for the defense of the helpless—and those who serve in positions of responsibility under Him will exercise authority with the same motivation.

Epilogue to Proverbs: The Wife of Noble Character (Proverbs 31:10-31) March 25-31

“TYPE: WISDOM POEM, ACROSTIC CHIASMUS” (*NAC*). We come now to the end of the book of Proverbs with a carefully crafted poem describing aspects of an ideal wife. The Hebrew word that the King James and New King James Versions translate as “virtuous” in verse 10 is *hayil*. This word has the sense of “strength”—as it is translated in verse 3 of this same chapter. It is also rendered “well” in verse 29. It is elsewhere used in the sense of military valor or bravery (which we will consider further in later comments here). Yet Boaz called Ruth a woman of *hayil* in Ruth 3:11—the point being that she was a woman of good, strong character. The sense of the word seems to be powerful and elevated. Indeed, note the description of the Proverbs 31 wife as being clothed with “strength and honor” (verse 25)—with high dignity. The word rendered “woman” (KJV) or “wife” (NKJV) can mean either of these. The context here

shows that she is a wife. Thus, “wife of noble character” (NIV) seems a good way to render the phrase referring to her in verse 10. We should recall earlier the same expression being used in Proverbs 12:4: “A wife of noble character is her husband’s crown” (NIV). This concluding poem of Proverbs 31 extols that point in greater detail and literary richness.

As the latter part of chapter 30 was characterized by the repeated use of a literary device (the numerical sayings), so the latter part of chapter 31 is a brilliantly structured literary composition.

Who is the author of this section? Does it continue the instruction from Lemuel’s mother, just as the latter section of Proverbs 30 appears to continue the words of Agur? In chapter 30, there are thematic ties between the sections. Proverbs 31 also contains such ties. The negative image of having one’s strength (*hayil*) sapped through sensual indulgence with women in verse 3 is answered by the positive image of the poem’s woman of strong character (*hayil*). As the righteous king opens his mouth in the cause of social justice (verses 8-9), so this honorable woman opens her mouth with wisdom and kindness (verse 26). And her focus is likewise on serving others.

In its introduction to the poem of chapter 31, *The New American Commentary* says: “While this poem apparently does not describe the wife of a king and is not addressed to Lemuel, we cannot say that it is not part of the Lemuel text. Ancient wisdom texts could combine material in a way that seems incongruous to the modern reader, and the poem could come from Lemuel or his mother. If it is not part of the Lemuel text, it is an anonymous poem perhaps added as an epilogue to the canonical text. If that is the case, it is probably fairly late since epilogues are a late phenomenon. [Of course, many have suggested that this concluding poem was written by Solomon—attribution being deemed unnecessary since he is named as the principle author of the book at the outset (1:1).] Either way, however, the interpretation of the text is not affected, and the significance that the canonical Book of Proverbs ends in this manner remains.”

There are multiple layers of organization in the poem, demonstrating great skill on the part of the writer. First of all, the work is acrostic, meaning that each of the 22 verses begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Thematically, the poem can be seen to “fold along the middle,” as it were—with a point just before the center (between verses 19-20) serving as a “seam.” Note the following structure, adapted from *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*:

Introduction (vv. 10-12)	Wife’s value (<i>generally and to husband</i>)	What she is and does ----- What results
Body: Her activities (vv. 13-27)	Her cottage industry (vv. 13-19) ----- <i>Seam</i> ----- Her social achievements (vv. 20-27)	
Conclusion (vv. 28-31)	Her praise (<i>from family and all</i>)	

The seam at verses 19-20 is itself arranged in chiastic (concentric) fashion, considering the different Hebrew words used for “hand” and “palm”:

A Her hands she extends to the spinning rod
 B Her palms grasp the spindle (v. 19)

-----Seam-----

B’ Her palm spreads out to the poor
 A’ Her hands she extends to the needy (v. 20)

This unit, an important hinge point in the poem, serves two purposes. Verse 19 concludes the first part of the poem, showing her worth and efforts, while verse 20 opens the next section, showing the results of her character. Moreover the two verses specifically illustrate the point that her activities (work with the hands, v. 19) are in fact done to benefit others (to open her hands to those in need, v. 20).

On top of all this, however, is another chiastic structure spanning the whole of the poem—which places the focal point on another verse. The integration of these various structural elements is astounding. *The New American Commentary* gives the overlaying chiasmus and comments on it:

- “A: High value of a good wife (v. 10)
- “B: Husband benefited by wife (vv. 11-12)
- “C: Wife works hard (vv. 13-19)
- “D: Wife [opens hand] to the poor (v. 20)
- “E: No fear of snow (v. 21a)
- “F: Children clothed in scarlet (v. 21b)
- “G: Coverings for bed, wife wears linen (v. 22)
- “H: Public respect for husband (v. 23)
- “G’: Sells garments and sashes (v. 24)
- “F’: Wife clothed in dignity (v. 25a)
- “E’: No fear of future (v. 25b)
- “D’: Wife [opens mouth with] wisdom [and kindness] (v. 26)
- “C’: Wife works hard (v. 27)
- “B’: Husband and children praise wife (vv. 28-29)
- “A’: High value of a good wife (vv. 30-31).

“The center point of this chiasmus is v. 23, the declaration that the husband is highly regarded at the gate. The verse has been read as almost an intrusion into the poem; all the other verses praise the wife, but this verse alone focuses on the esteem the husband commands. Far from being an intrusion, however, v. 23 actually establishes the central message of the poem: this woman is the kind of wife a man needs in order to be successful in life. [Indeed, the concentric arrangement of the noble wife’s characteristics around this verse may be an allusion to her serving as the husband’s encircling crown in 12:4.]

“In short, the original intended audience was not young women (‘this is what kind of wife you should be’) but young men (‘this is what kind of wife you should get’). This does not mean that the poem cannot be used to instruct women, but the interpreter must recognize its primary objective. Although it may seem strange that a wisdom poem on the virtues of a good wife should be directed at young men, it is in keeping with the whole thrust of Proverbs. The book everywhere addresses the young man (‘my son’) and not the young woman. It expounds in great detail on evils of the prostitute and how she is a snare for a young man; it says nothing about lusty boys and the threats they pose for young women. It is a false reading, however, to suppose that biblical wisdom despises women or views them as fundamentally corrupt (this poem alone contradicts that notion). There is no double standard; the gender slant in Proverbs is a matter of audience orientation rather than ideological bias [just as Ruth, Esther and Song of Solomon may be wisdom texts oriented to young women]. Proverbs directs the reader away from the prostitute toward the good wife because its implied reader is a young man. For the same reason, Wisdom is personified as a woman and not as a man” (note on Proverbs 31:10-31).

As to this latter point, the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* says that the poem, besides offering counsel on the kind of wife a young man ought to seek, may be intended “in a subtle way to advise the young man (again) to marry Lady Wisdom, thus returning to the theme of chs. 1–9 (as [begun in 1:20-33 and] climaxed in ch. 9; compare the description of Lady Wisdom in 9:1-2 with the virtues of the wife in 31:10-31). In any event, the concluding epitomizing of wisdom in the wife of noble character forms a literary frame with the opening discourses [of the book], where wisdom is personified as a woman” (introduction to Proverbs). Thus, the poem is not only a brilliant literary creation on its own, but its message and position also makes the whole of Proverbs a greater, more unified literary work.

The Expositor’s Bible Commentary says more about the woman here epitomizing wisdom: “The theme of the poem, the wife of noble character, captures the ideals of wisdom that have filled the book.... It may well be that this is more the point of the composition than merely a portrayal of the ideal wife” (note on 31:10-31). *Expositor’s* probably veers too far from the practical, literal sense in its assessment of the passage—since the words of the poem do not reveal it to be an obvious personification of wisdom as in Proverbs 1, 8 and 9. But the commentary gives some good reasons for at least seeing important symbolism here and not treating the poem of Proverbs 31 as some kind of numbered checklist of female righteousness.

Continuing in *Expositor’s* with some inserted comments: “The woman here presented is a wealthy aristocrat who runs a household estate with servants and conducts business affairs—real estate, vineyards, and merchandise—domestic affairs, and charity. It would be quite a task for any woman [of average

means] to emulate this pattern [though the general pattern of behavior and motives can and should be followed by any godly woman].... Others have also recognized that more is going on here than a description of the ideal wife or instructions for the bride to be.... [One scholar] allows that ‘this lady’s standard is not implied to be in reach of all [in every respect]’... but rather reveals the flowering of wisdom in domestic life.... [Another commentator] likewise affirms that ‘as a whole it cannot be read as a kind of blueprint of the ideal Israelite housewife, either for men to measure their wives against or for their wives to try [in all respects] to live up to’.... Moreover, the work says nothing about the woman’s personal relationship with her husband, her intellectual or emotional strengths, or her religious activities [though it does show that her life is based on the proper fear of God—verse 30]. In general it appears that the woman of Proverbs 31 is a symbol of wisdom [though this should not detract from some practical principles on being, choosing or appreciating a godly wife].... Indeed, many commentators rightly invite a contrast to the earlier portrayals of Dame Folly lurking dangerously in the streets—she was to be avoided—and Lady Wisdom, who is to be embraced. The Lady Wisdom in this chapter stands in the strongest contrast to the adulterous woman in the earlier chapters” (note on 31:10-31).

The same commentary notes more about this with regard to structure and composition: “The passage has striking similarities with hymns.... Usually a hymn is written to God, but here apparently it was written to the wife of noble character. A comparison with Psalm 111, a hymn to God, illustrates some of the similarities. The psalm begins with *halelu yah* (‘Hallelu Yah’...or ‘Praise the LORD’); this is reflected in Proverbs 31:31, which says, ‘Her works bring her praise [*wihaleluha*].’ Psalm 111:2 speaks of God’s works; Proverbs 31:13 speaks of her works. Psalm 111:2 says that the works of the Lord are searched or ‘pondered’ (*derushim*); Proverbs 31:13 says that she ‘selects’ (*dareshah*) wool and flax. Psalm 111:3 says that the Lord’s work is honorable (*hadar*; NIV, ‘majestic’); Proverbs 31:25 ascribes strength and ‘dignity’ (*hadar*) to the woman. Psalm 111:4 says that the Lord is gracious and full of compassion; Proverbs 31:26 ascribes the law of compassion to the woman. Psalm 111:5 says that the Lord gives ‘food’ (*terep*); Proverbs 31:15 says that the woman provides ‘food’ (*terep*) for her house. Psalm 111:10 says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom—the motto of Proverbs; Proverbs 31:30 describes the woman as fearing the Lord. Psalm 111:10 says that the Lord’s praise will endure; Proverbs 31:31 says that the woman will be praised for her works. It is clear [or at least reasonable to think] that Proverbs 31 is patterned after the hymn to extol the works of wisdom” (same note).

Expositor’s and other commentaries also point out that the passage bears similarities with heroic literature—seeming like an ode to a military champion. “For example, ‘woman of valor’ (*’esheth-hayil* in v. 10...) is the same expression one would find in Judges for the ‘mighty man of valor’ (*gibbor hehayil*, Judg 6:12...)—the warrior aristocrat; ‘strength’ (*’oz* in vv. 17..., 25) is elsewhere used for powerful deeds and heroics (e.g., Exod 15:2, 13; 1 Sam 2:10); [‘gain’] (v. 11) in [‘no lack of gain’] is actually the word for ‘plunder’...; ‘food’ (v. 15) is actually ‘prey’ (*terep*); ‘she holds’ (*shillehah* in v. 19) is an expression also used in military settings (cf. Judg 5:26...); ‘surpass them all’ (v. 29) is an expression that signifies victory” (same note). Commentator Tremper Longman says: “Perhaps life’s struggles here are envisioned as a war and the woman as an active and successful participant in taming life’s chaos” (*How to Read Proverbs*, p. 140).

Longman also points out: “Another of the dominant themes throughout the poem is the woman’s boundless energy. It is hard to believe that any single person could ever accomplish as much as this ideal woman, and perhaps the description is meant as a composite sketch. In any case, this woman is described not only as a warrior but also as a merchant ship that brings produce to port, namely her home. She also is active in commercial endeavors, not to speak of philanthropy toward the needy. Not only are her actions praised, but also her qualities of mind and attitude. She is fearless about the future, wise and kind. This woman has nothing at all to do with laziness. The emphasis at the end of the poem, as one might expect, is not on beauty or charm, but on the woman’s fear of the Lord. Indeed, this woman is the epitome of wisdom. She is the human embodiment of God’s wisdom; a flesh-and-blood personification of Woman Wisdom” (p. 141).

With this in mind, *Expositor’s* is right to point out: “The poem certainly presents a pattern for women who want to develop a life of wisdom; but since it is essentially about wisdom, its lessons are for both men and women to develop. The passage teaches that the fear of the Lord will inspire people to be faithful stewards of the time and talents that God has given; that wisdom is productive and beneficial for

others, requiring great industry in life's endeavors; that wisdom is best taught and lived in the home—indeed, the success of the home demands wisdom—and that wisdom is balanced living, giving attention to domestic responsibilities as well as business enterprises and charitable service” (note on Proverbs 31:10-31).

A Woman Who Feels the Lord—the Wise Choice (Proverbs 31:10-31) Mar. 25-31 Cont'd

Let's now note a few more issues in the text of the passage.

Verse 10 points out the rarity of such a find as the virtuous woman and her supreme value, which should be treasured (again, applying to both a good wife and wisdom more generally).

Verse 11, the second in the poem, is a good illustration of a poetic device corresponding to the acrostic of the passage. “The Hebrew of the *bet* line... (Prov. 31:11) has a concentration of the letter *bet*. *Betah bah leb ba'lah wesalal lo' yehsar*” (Longman, p. 45). This was perhaps done to get Hebrew readers to take note of the acrostic pattern up front.

Verses 13 and 19, mentioning the woman's textile work, serve to frame an inclusio (within the chiasmic structure outline above). This should not be taken to imply that women today must take on such work or start a garment business. The point is that she makes good, productive use of her talents for the welfare of her household. The case given is only an example, wherein the wife uses her skills to produce items she can then trade or sell in order to acquire other goods and services for her home. And what of her buying a field in verse 16? This likewise does not mean that wives today should go about making real estate purchases without consulting their husbands. It may well be that, in the example given, the woman's household is well enough off that such investments (the purpose here being for gardening) are within her discretionary spending. Yet if this involved a major expenditure of family resources we can rest assured that the noble wife would speak to her husband, for one of the principles of wisdom expressed throughout Proverbs is to seek counsel in making important decisions. The point of the example is twofold: 1) the husband trusts his valued wife enough to allow her to spend the household income in various ways; and 2) she takes initiative in such matters and is thoughtfully prudent and active in doing so.

Verse 15 does not mean that the woman portrayed here, a wealthy lady of the house, gets up early to personally make breakfast for the servants. “Instead, she supervises preparation of the morning meal and sees to it that all have a fair share. This implies first that she cares even for the servant girls and second that she is diligent about overseeing them” (*New American Commentary*, note on verse 15).

Verse 17 shows the responsible woman keeping herself fit so as to continue doing her work and serving her family.

Having succeeded so well in providing for her family, the virtuous wife is able to give to others besides—and does so (verse 20). Indeed, this is part of the point of her work, as noted earlier.

Verse 21 shows the woman not fearing for those of her household when it's cold as she has enabled them to be clothed with “scarlet.” The Hebrew here is *shanim*. Some, following the ancient Greek Septuagint translation, change the vowels in the Hebrew to read *shenayim*, meaning “double”—the idea being that they are wearing layers. However, “scarlet,” denoting costly garments, might imply comfort even in inclement weather. Note the wife's clothing of purple in verse 22. The word rendered “tapestry” in this verse means “coverings,” which might refer to bedding or other clothing.

In verse 25, where the KJV and NKJV have “she shall rejoice in time to come,” the meaning is more likely “she can laugh at the days to come” (NIV). That is, being armed with strength and honor (same verse), she can face whatever the future might bring with confidence (able even to dismiss the idea that she and her family might come to destruction). In the overall chiasmic structure, this parallels her being unafraid of the cold in verse 21.

“Verse 27 is a brief, summarizing counterpart to the lengthy description of the wife's diligence in vv. 13-19. Here the text explicitly states that she avoids laziness” (*NAC*, note on verse 27).

Verses 28-29 show that such a woman is praised by her grateful family. And the next two verses provide us with the summary conclusion. Verse 30 states that charm and beauty are fleeting, while real and enduring praise is for the woman who fears the Lord—returning to the book's opening counsel (1:7). This woman should be rewarded with love and gratitude (30:31).

The New American Commentary summarizes the matter well: “The good wife described here has every virtue wisdom can offer. She is diligent, has a keen sense for business matters, is compassionate, is

prepared for the future, is a good teacher, is dedicated to her family, and above all else possesses the primary characteristic of biblical wisdom, the fear of the Lord (looking back to Prov 1:7, the theme of the book). She is no less than Woman Wisdom made real. The riches Woman Wisdom offers (8:18) are brought home by the hard work of the good wife (31:11). Proverbs has, in effect, come full circle. It began by saying that the young man must embrace the imaginary ideal of Woman Wisdom in order to have a fulfilling life [1:20-33; 8:1-36; 9:1-6], and it ends by saying that one needs a good wife to achieve this goal.

“The young man has no choice but to follow one woman or the other. He will either pursue Woman Wisdom or Woman Folly, and with them he will take their counterparts, the good wife or the prostitute/quarrelsome wife. He cannot attain wisdom without the good wife because she creates the environment in which he can flourish. If he chooses an evil woman, he has little hope of transcending the context she will make for him. Wisdom is not simply a matter of learning rules and precepts but is a matter of socialization, and a man is socialized first by his parents and then by his wife.... In Proverbs wisdom is not merely or even primarily intellectual; it is first of all relational. The young person finds wisdom through three specific relationships” (note on 31:30-31)—with God, parents and spouse.

Indeed, the arrangement of the book of Proverbs is ingenious in this respect. It commences with telling a young man that knowledge and wisdom begin with the fear of God, laying out the choice between wisdom and folly, both calling for him. It follows with a great deal of parental advice in the form of short sayings. Then it ends with a “graduation,” so to speak, to adult life—with marriage to a godly woman who also wisely lives by the fear of God. Yet for success in life, a young man must not only choose a wise woman. He must choose wisdom itself. This, then, is the culmination of the book. The paramount choice presented lies before us all—men and women, young and old alike. Choose wisely.

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