

A woman of justice (Proverbs 31:10-31)

What does it mean to fear the Lord?

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“A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.”

Commentators and preachers have sometimes lifted up this phrase as the capstone of the Ode to a Virtuous Woman. This is the key to the whole poem, the crowning glory of the virtuous woman. She fears, and her fear of God causes her to be obedient.

Emphasizing fear—and introducing a term like obedience, which isn't present in the text—slants the interpretation away from the power that this capable woman wields. Some may try to soften the fear language by saying that fear of the Lord is a kind of reverent awe. I myself have used this definition of fear to try to undermine negative uses of this and other scriptures that invoke fear of God as a good thing.

There have been times when the image of a fear-inducing God caused me to seriously question Christian tradition. I saw that inducing fear in people was often used to help certain people maintain a dominating power over others.

I still think that reverent awe is a good definition of fear of God. It acknowledges the vastness of God's presence and power. But I now have an additional definition of fear of God. It's based on human fear of God's anger, but it's rooted in a deeper understanding of what makes God angry. God's anger is not anger at people who stand up for themselves with dignity. It's not anger at people who want to be treated fairly. It's not anger at women who take care of themselves as much as they take

care of other people. These are not the things that make God angry. And these are not the things that should make us fearful of the Lord.

God's anger, as described in the Bible, is consistently anger at injustice, greed, arrogance. The books of the prophets are filled with it. In Amos, the injustice is exhibited by those who trample on the needy and bring ruin to the poor. They cheat people with small parcels, high prices, and inferior goods (Amos 8:4-6). In Jeremiah, the people draw God's anger by oppressing immigrants, orphans, and widows, shedding innocent blood (Jeremiah 7:6). In Ezekiel, collecting and hoarding silver and gold lead to rampant violence and God's corrective wrath (Ezekiel 7:19, 12:19).

Proverbs 31 picks up on some of these themes. It begins with a few admonitions from King Lemuel's mother, before she tells him what type of woman to seek as his queen. Kings should not drink wine or stronger drinks, since in their drunkenness they might forget the decrees of God and "pervert the rights of all the afflicted." A king should speak out for the destitute and defend the rights of the poor and needy. These are the kinds of things that God cares about deeply. A woman who fears God also cares about these things. She, like a good king, fears that God will be angry at those who harm and don't protect the vulnerable.

The capable wife, the virtuous woman, therefore "opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy." While she cares for her family and herself, she thinks beyond her family to the community at large. If fear of the Lord is based on fear of God's consequences in response to injustice, greed, and arrogance, then a woman who fears the Lord expects and embodies justice herself.

Similarly, a king who fears the Lord would exhibit the justice called for by God and described by his mother, both toward the destitute, poor, and needy and toward his wife, the queen. Such a king will give his wife a share in the fruit of her hands.

This verse, in its position at the end of the poem, seems to me a more likely capstone of this scripture. A woman who fears the Lord is a woman of justice, and a king who fears the Lord gives due credit and justly shares the fruits of his queen's work.