

THE QUEEN MOTHER ...AND THE PERFECT WOMAN

The words of king Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him.
(Prov. 31:1)

King Lemuel has always been one of the most mysterious characters mentioned in the Bible. Nothing is known about his identity, kingdom, or subjects. Many historians believe he was Solomon, but if that had been true, why did not the ancient writer say so? Others believe he may have been the ruler of a small adjacent kingdom and was an admirer and friend of his important neighbor. A few critics state he was the figment of a person's imagination; that he never existed. That is a very unlikely supposition since the Scriptures state he was taught by his mother who was concerned about her future daughter-in-law. The last chapter in the book of Proverbs begins with the statement, "The words of king Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him."

Certain questions are unavoidable. Why did she offer advice to her son? Was she a member of the royal court and perhaps even a wife of Solomon? Had she seen the evil effects of alcohol in the lives of people within the palace? When the integrity of Solomon was undermined by many pagan women, and lust mined the spirituality of the ruler, did this unknown mother fear her son might be influenced by the example of his benefactor? She was very shrewd; her observations concerning the "virtuous woman" expressed concern.

Was Lemuel a bachelor, and did his mother's opinions increase the difficulty of selecting a spouse? Was he so influenced by her words that he had no interest in younger women? The answers to these questions may never be known, so we are left with two mysterious figures whose words and deeds were intriguing.

Another question arises regarding the final segment in Solomon's book. At first glance it seems the inclusion of Lemuel's manuscript

might have been an afterthought of the man who arranged the ancient script. The thousands of statements attributed to Solomon were carefully condensed into thirty chapters. This would have been the task of the recorder; a man appointed by the monarch. Yet why, when the task was completed, were the words of a comparative stranger added to the literary efforts of the king? The compiler could not have assumed that responsibility without permission from a higher authority. Was Lemuel an intimate friend of the royal household, and did the king of Israel see merit in the words of the unnamed mother? Did Solomon instruct his servant to include the new manuscript in the book then being completed?

It is necessary to consider another fact. Since the Proverbs of Solomon were to become an integral part of Holy Scripture, why did God permit the inclusion of additional words? It is believed that "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, it must be concluded that God permitted the inclusion of the advice offered by this mother to her son.

Jehovah also had a Royal Son for whom a bride would be sought. Perhaps the words of a heavenly Father may be heard in the message of the wise mother who desired the best for her boy. Not every woman would be suitable to become Lemuel's wife. Similarly, not all people would be worthy to become part of the bride of Christ. Therefore, God explained the characteristics of people worthy to be joined to the Prince

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of Peace. Lemuel's mother carefully mentioned seven important details essential in the life of a virtuous woman.

Her Worth... Colossal

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. (Prov. 31:10)

Evidently the ancient mother possessed rare insight into the quality of women and jewels. It is safe to assume that as the mother of a king, she owned excellent jewelry. Some of her treasures may have been purchased; others might have been the gifts of her family or visiting dignitaries. Unless a kingdom had been ravaged by war, the royal household would possess the best gems obtainable. At the time of Solomon's excellence his friends enjoyed unprecedented prosperity. The word that has been translated rubies may also mean diamonds. The

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Septuagint version of the Scriptures translates the verse, "Such a one is more valuable than precious stones." The mother who uttered these words believed a virtuous woman was difficult to find. Money could obtain pearls, diamonds, and rubies, but even excessive wealth could not procure the unobtainable.

It would cost a fortune to obtain a suitable woman to adorn the palace of her son. A dowry meant "the purchase price of a bride—a sum of money paid to the father of the bride to compensate for the economic loss to the family." Jacob, who had no financial resources, served fourteen years for the two daughters of Laban (see Gen. 29:25-28).

Such payments are unknown in the Western world, but throughout the Middle East all families are aware of dowries expected when marriages are solemnized. The Christians in Corinth knew what Paul meant when he said, "Ye are bought with a price" (see I Cor. 7:23). That price was "the precious blood of Christ" (see I Peter 1:19). It was infinitely greater than the cost of the world's rarest gems.

Her Work... Continuing

[She] worketh willingly with her hands. (Prov. 31:13)

The idea of working queens at first seems strange and startling. They work hard, but their efforts are usually confined to public appearances, state banquets, and other events at which her presence is considered to be necessary. She has to be elegant, sophisticated, and able to cope with any situation that may arise. It is therefore thought provoking to discover the woman desired for King Lemuel was not required to possess any of these characteristics. It should also be considered that royalty enjoys the privilege of having many servants. The performance of menial tasks would not be expected of a king's wife. Yet Lemuel was advised to seek for a woman whose "candle goeth not out at night, [who] layeth her hand to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff" (v. 18-19): ". . . that is the staff to which is tied the bunch of flax from which the spinning wheel draws the thread. To this she applies her hand, and deftly performs the task of spinning the flax into thread" (quoted in part from the Pulpit Commentary, vol. 9 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 599).

Court women sometimes did this kind of work, but for the most part it was the industry of peasants. Evidently Lemuel's mother believed that if a woman were faithful in the less important tasks of life, she was worthy to be considered for greater honors.

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When the royal son listened to his mother's wisdom, he probably smiled. The anticipated queen would not be required to work; she would

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do so because it gave her pleasure.

This is the secret of all joyous service for the King of Kings. Some people who profess to love Him are content to receive His blessings but give little in return. Others rejoice in the privilege of service. It expresses their gratitude.

Her Wisdom ... Charming

She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar
She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her
household are clothed with scarlet [double garments]. (Prov.
31:14, 21)

The woman who wrote this character sketch possessed great insight. The reference to the arrival of the merchants' ships indicated she was prepared for emergencies and desired commodities not obtainable locally. Orders had been placed with the captains of the sailing ships, so that even in a famine she could survive. That mother never left everything to the last moment and never blamed God for her problems.

The same fact was expressed in the statement, "She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet." The word translated scarlet would be better interpreted "double garments." During the summer this woman prepared for the chilling days of winter, making warm clothing for her family. She resembled the old Scottish lady who said, "If you thatch your house in the summer, there will be no need to fear the winter." The mother from a bygone age desired those features in the woman destined to share her son's life. The same wisdom should be displayed by every Christian. The Bible says, "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). No person disputes the fact that death is inevitable, and only fools challenge the second statement in the text. Wise travelers carry passports to gain entry into other lands. Intelligent Christians know their passport is authorized by Christ Himself and made valid by His precious blood.

We are pilgrims pressing onward,
To our home beyond the sky;
We are each day getting nearer,
To that glorious place on high.

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Her Wealth... Considerable

She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. . . . She perceiveth that her merchandise is good . . . She maketh fine linen; and selleth it, and delivereth girdles unto the merchant. (Prov. 31:16, 18, 24)

This picture of a very talented woman becomes increasingly attractive. She might be called "The Dream Woman" of the Old Testament. Her industrious pursuits would have been lucrative; her works of art were admired by the merchants who bought her creations. Perhaps the reference to the merchants' ships in verse 14 should be considered with this text. Maybe the woman became interested in exporting her goods. The merchants received and sold her products and paid with whatsoever she desired from foreign countries.

Nevertheless, she refused to "keep all her eggs in one basket." Storms could delay the arrival of ships, and occasionally voyages ended in disaster. With commendable foresight, she considered the purchase of a field and as quickly as possible planted vines and became the proud owner of a vineyard. It must be remembered this type of woman may only have existed in the mind of Lemuel's mother; it was her idea of the hard-to-find virtuous woman (see v. 10). Did such a person ever marry the king? The historian forgot to record details everyone would

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love to know. Perhaps the authoress of this "prophecy" was setting a standard so that her son would desire only the best.

When these inspiring facts are related to Christians, they provide a standard of excellence not reached by every believer. The woman was tireless and enthusiastic. Whatsoever her hand found to do, she did it with all her might (see Eccl. 9:10). She never became weary in well doing (see Gal. 6:9). If she ever shared the throne of Lemuel, she adorned his palace and enriched his kingdom. Her lord would have been intensely proud of her efforts. Could the same be said of Christ and us?

Her Words... Consoling

She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. (Prov. 31:26)

Probably wisdom and kindness were among the most attractive of all her attributes. When she spoke she said something! Some people are very eloquent but say nothing. Perhaps the unknown woman had

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become an apt student of Solomon. Excessive knowledge sometimes begets haughtiness, pride, and a sense of superiority that hurts associates. When a wise person is kind and compassionate, admirers increase dramatically. Jesus was the wisest Man of all generations, but He is remembered most for His love. Some of His listeners might have had difficulty understanding certain statements, but even the children appreciated His encircling arms.

This woman who communicated with and helped troubled neighbors was a worthy representative of her royal spouse. She became a forerunner of the church, the bride of Christ, who, in sharing God's infinite love, helps the needy. Access to kings was limited and often denied. Affairs of state claimed the attention of the monarch, making personal interviews impossible. Yet a queen was not as elusive. The description of this fair lady said "she stretcheth out her hand to the poor." She resembled the Savior, who, although He was the Ruler of the universe, came to earth to help the needy. Paul said, "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). It would be interesting to discover what other similarities existed between the bride of Lemuel and the bride to whom Paul addressed his second epistle.

Her Warmth ... Captivating

Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. (Prov. 31:28-29)

Lemuel's mother may or may not have been one of the wives of Solomon, but she was certainly the queen of her own household. Happy is the person whose children call her blessed; she is amongst the happiest of all people. Having mentioned things to be admired in a virtuous woman, the mother spoke of a home and family. The Scriptures assure believers that if they seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, all other legitimate desires will be forthcoming (see Matt. 6:33). God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (see Heb. 11:6).

"Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land" (v. 23). "Her husband also, and he praiseth her" (v. 28b). It has often been said that behind every successful man stands a woman. That statement might have originated with the ancient mother who

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offered advice to her son. The woman who made girdles (leather belts studded with expensive jewels), whose beautiful creations were desired along the trading routes of the world, brought honor to the man who shared her life. Respected by the rulers of the land, he sat with elders in the gate of the city where matters of civic and national importance were discussed.

"Her children arise up and call her blessed." Such a mother would be an inspiration to her family. When she chastised, she did it gently; if she counseled, she did so wisely; and in handling family problems, she was always a shining example of discretion. When her children became adults they remembered the mother to whom they owed everything they possessed.

Today, in a world torn by family discord, differences, and divorces, the ancient picture of "A Virtuous Woman" is of more spiritual worth than anything produced by the world's greatest painters.

Her Worship... Challenging

... a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised. (Prov. 31: 30b)

It is significant that in the description of a virtuous woman, fellowship with God was the last quality to be mentioned. The mother of Lemuel went to great lengths to explain why this person qualified to be considered among the most desirable women in the world. Her reputation was excellent, but the mother of the king wished to say more. Even if a person possessed and exhibited all those attributes, without the fear of God she was nothing! Apparently, the secret of her charm and success was a sincere faith in God. She was a woman who feared the Lord. David believed this was the beginning of wisdom (see Ps. 111:10).

Expressed through her charitable deeds was gratitude; she recognized that all her capabilities came from the Giver of every good and perfect gift. That woman would have been an ardent pupil of the One who said, "Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over" (Luke 6:38).

Let it be admitted that all people are not as gifted as this hypothetical woman from a bygone age. Some folk would never succeed in business even if they tried for a thousand years. Others do not possess the rare qualities mentioned by the mother of King Lemuel. Nevertheless, to believe and love God is within the reach of every person. It is not

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necessary to become wealthy to serve the Lord, and poverty is no insurmountable barrier preventing fellowship with the Almighty. The order of merit expressed was a perfect example of a statement made by the Savior: "But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first" (Matt. 19:30). This supplies a challenge for every Christian: "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Prov. 3:6).

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