

Who can find an Eshet Chayil?

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Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8, Mark 9:30-37

Our reading this morning from Proverbs asks what sounds like a rather banal question at first glance: “Who can find a capable wife?” It could almost be the kind of question that exasperated young men might ask each other after several bad dates. “How on earth do I find a good wife, one who will take care of me and make me happy?”

But what if I told you that that is not really the question being asked in this passage? I mean, it is maybe a part of the question, but it is about so much more than that.

I am going to teach you two Hebrew words this morning, the two Hebrew words that begin that passage in Proverbs. The words are אִשֶּׁת-חַיִל, *eshet chayil*. Those are the two words that are translated as, “a capable wife” in the New Revised Standard Version, the thing that we are being asked who can find it. And here is the interesting thing about those two words. They *can* be translated as *capable wife*, but that is about the most boring translation that anyone could come up with.

Woman or Wife?

Let’s start with the first word, *Eshet*. That is the Hebrew word for a woman. It is, for example, the Hebrew word that Adam uses when he first sees Eve and says, “this one shall be called woman.” Now, *Eshet* can also mean wife because Hebrew doesn’t actually have a separate word for wife. You have to guess from the context whether it means the one or the other. So, for example, if you see a phrase like, “Samuel’s *Eshet*,” you would probably translate that as, “Samuel’s wife,” rather than, “Samuel’s woman.” But when you see the word all on its own, the general practice would be to translate it as “woman.”

So the question in this passage is, which case are we looking at? This is not entirely clear. For the most part, the passage speaks of this woman and what she does alone. And yet, there are a few parts of the passage that make it clear that she is actually married. So how should we translate it?

Misuse of this Passage

And here is where there’s this incredible advantage to preach about this passage over zoom because I can see some of your faces, and I know your eyes are glassing over. “Is he really going to talk about the ins and outs of Hebrew translation here?” you’re thinking. “I didn’t come here for a lesson in linguistics, I came here for a sermon that would help me to live my life better.” But we actually have to answer this particular question before we can figure out how this passage applies to your life. It matters, it really

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matters, whether this passage is talking about a wife or a woman.

It matters because of how some people have used this passage of scripture. They have sometimes used it to teach women that the only way in which they can live praiseworthy lives is by being wives and operating exclusively within a household. So it actually matters a great deal whether this passage is talking about a wife or a woman.

Capable?

Now let's move on to the second word, *Chayil*. Once again, "capable" is a perfectly acceptable translation of that word. It does mean someone who is able to act and to do. But I am not sure that that translation really captures the flavour of the original Hebrew word. This is a word that is mostly used in the Old Testament to describe men. And, when it is applied to men, it is generally used to describe men who are strong and powerful warriors. It is usually translated as "men of valour," or "mighty men." And that makes me think that a translation like "a capable woman," doesn't quite capture how this verse would have been understood by the people who first read it. There is no question that there is a dynamism and power in this word that goes far beyond mere capacity or competence. This is an exciting woman, a woman who impresses and who kind of blows you away when you think about her. That is what this passage is talking about.

Woman of Valour

And so I do not think that a translation like, a capable wife, really cuts it for this passage. The traditional Jewish English translation of this verse is to call this person a "woman of valour." And that, when you think about it, sounds pretty exciting. I mean, if you want a real challenge that you can take to heart, I don't think you can do much better than that. And I am here today to speak specifically to you women of faith and say that, yes, this is something that you can aspire to. You can be and become a woman of valour.

So, the big question is what is that going to look like. What, in this passage, are we being told that women should aspire to? How can you become an *eshet chayil*? Now, as I said, people have often used this passage to try and convince women that they should just be content with being a competent housewife. That interpretation doesn't just depend on whether you translate the first word as *wife* or *woman*, because the whole passage does paint a picture of what this woman of valour is like.

The Limitations of Patriarchal Society

And it is true that, for the most part, we see her acting and behaving like a typical ancient housewife. She spends a lot of her time providing food and clothing for her family. In addition, she apparently takes such good care of her husband that he spends all his time sitting in the city gates and hanging out with all the other guys. So, there are certainly some who have taken from this passage the message that the only way for a woman to shine is by being a wife and mother.

But I feel that that is a very shallow reading of the whole passage. Yes, the woman in this passage mostly spends her time at domestic chores, but I do not think that anyone should take from that that domestic duties are the only acceptable way for a woman to spend her time.

The Bible was produced in a society that did impose some severe restrictions on women. So, of course, the woman in this passage pretty much sticks to the limits that have been imposed upon her. But I do not believe that there is any sense in which that is what makes her a woman of valour. The limits that were placed on her, after all, would have simply been taken for granted both by her and by everyone else around her. These were not the things that made her extraordinary, and so no one would have seen them as making her a woman of valour.

Breaking the Limits

And so we need to look closer at the passage and, when we do, we should notice that this woman does not *just* stick to the strict limitations that have been placed upon her. We see that, for example, **“She considers a field and buys it; With the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.”** Now, let me tell you, real estate speculation was not, in that world, something that was seen as an ordinary female activity. Nor was the management of crops. Yet this woman steps outside of what is expected of her, she pushes the boundaries, and this is clearly one of the things that makes her a woman of valour. She also engages in trade, bringing in food from afar, it says, and also creating goods that she sells through merchants. This kind of enterprise is certainly admirable, but it was not normally within the scope of what was considered womanly activities.

I think there is definitely an argument to be made that what the Bible calls a woman of valour, is not merely a woman who sticks to the duties that her society tells her that she is supposed to do. The Bible truly celebrates a woman who boldly steps outside of the limitations that are placed upon her.

Women of Valour

I know many women of valour in this congregation and, indeed, I have known them in every congregation that I have been blessed to be associated with. You are the women who often inspire me. I know that each one of you deals with limitations in your life. Fortunately, of course, we are deeply blessed to be living in a time when women are much more freely able to pursue all kinds of endeavours that once would have been denied to them. And our society has been deeply blessed by the contributions that have come from that freedom. But still, all of us deal with certain limitations. We deal with the expectations that are placed upon us by others. We struggle, some of us, with our own lack of self-esteem or the anxiety that holds us back. Sometimes, we deal with physical limitations or illness. But the women of valour that I see are those who don't let those things limit them, who step beyond the bounds and who often act in excellence.

And the best part is, I believe, is that this makes being a woman of valour something that any woman can achieve. It doesn't mean you have to have a certain mode of life. It doesn't mean that you have to be a housewife, nor does it mean you have to have a career. You just need to trust God to break through whatever barriers are holding you back. It also makes being a person of valour something available to anyone at all.

This is because everyone deals with some limitations in some place in their life. They may be related to gender, age, infirmity or mentality, but we've all got them. But God encourages us to overcome such barriers as an expression of faith in God and faithfulness to our calling. And, what's

more, a reward is promised, **“Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, And let her works praise her in the city gates.”** This, coming to us as it does from a society that usually severely limited women in their scope of action, is really quite an extraordinary statement.

Election Reflection

There is one other direction that this passage makes my thoughts go at this particular moment in time. I’m very aware, as I’m sure you are too, that tomorrow our country will go to the polls to elect the leaders who will guide our country over the next several no doubt very challenging years. And so I also cannot help but ask the question today, “Who can find a capable leader?” Or even better, who can find a leader of valour?

Now, I do not think that it is my place to tell you who you ought to vote for tomorrow. I will not even tell you who I intend to vote for in this forum. But I will tell you this, if you want a good description of the kind of leadership that we need, I think you could hardly do better than this description of a woman of valour in the Book of Proverbs. In some ways, it can be very helpful to think of our nation as one big household to which we all belong. And, in many ways, a good leader is going to have to look after our household much in the way that this woman looks after hers in Proverbs. So let me pull out just a few verses and let you consider for yourself how these might apply to the tasks that lie ahead for our federal leadership.

“She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.” Wouldn’t that be helpful in thinking about international trade?

“She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.” Talk about national infrastructure!

“She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.” Any good leader needs to think of those who fall through the cracks!

“She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.” Oh, it would be good to have such an *eshet chayil* as we face the crises that I am sure are yet to come!

Wouldn’t we be blessed to have such leaders who maintained such priorities? I know it’s not going to practically happen in this election that there will be a literal woman of valour at the head of the party that will form our next government. I do pray that day will come soon. But maybe we can pray for the next best thing, a man who is almost as good as an *eshet chayil*, a woman of valour.