



November 15th

THE NEW SHOFAR

God built the woman to build,

Where do we find a woman of valour today?

God is in the air, everywhere I look around...in every sight and every sound

Apologies to John Paul Young for playing around with the lines of the great song “Love in the air”. Google the words and replace the word ‘love’ with “God” and what you end up with is an insight into the poetry that is Proverbs 31. For Jews today, the Proverb is a song sung by men in praise of women, particularly their mothers, wives, aunties and daughters. It is an ode to women and the manner in which they bring alive the creative presence of God in human living. They personify the ever-present God of the Bible.

31:10 should be translated *a woman of valour, who can find her* and not, as is more common, *a virtuous woman*...One commentator speaks of how it is even used as a kind of verbal encouragement acknowledging courage, perseverance and joy in the midst of difficult and challenging circumstances – *go girl!* – *eshet chayil!* – to a friend battling cancer, or a work place situation, preparing for marriage, etc. “Valour” as used in the Proverb is not about bravery, about what you have done. It is about the way you have done it. It is a poem about the strong, courageous, determined yet self-effacing person who simply does what needs to be done because that is who they are. It is how they act.

The thoroughly modern woman of Proverbs 31

The Hebrew traditions has a saying – *God built the woman to build* and in the Hebrew that is a play on words that stresses how God *built* (*banah*) the woman with *wisdom* (*binah*). She was created thus to be God’s co-builder (*ezer*) in the world. Man was created differently, but it is only together that they complement each other. Male with female, or female without male is destined to self-destruct for it is not the way of the Creator God.

The *woman* here it notable in the way she (like God) is outward reaching. Her focus is on what endures (*fear of the Lord*) rather than what is passing (*beauty if vain*). In Proverbs, it is *fear of the Lord* that is *the beginning of Wisdom* (**1:7**). It is by learning and then modelling and teaching the importance of understanding our place before God, she brings a much-needed balance to the hedonistic world in which she raises her family.

I love **verse 18** – *She sees her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night*. Darkness never finds her unprepared. This is after a number of verses praising the total commitment she has to her work in the world. She has shown herself to be sympathetic, outgoing and a pathfinder to others – not just her own family. She shows leadership, has

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anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghongod.com

a vision, is entrepreneurial, is strong and ponders the meaning of life. It is as God's helper in creation, the woman reminds all peoples, male and female alike, of the way God sits at the centre of all that is. Ignore God, marginalize God and the house will not stand.

Matthew's parable of the talents

There is nothing wrong with sermons preaching on the way we should be using our God-given talents to the best of our ability. We will be judged on how we do or do not make use of them. The difficulty is how this is not Matthew's theology behind today's parable.

For the evangelist, it is an exhortation to Christians to remain hard at "work" collaborating with the ongoing saving actions of God in creation the Father had brought to a head with the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of his Son. For Matthew, we are living in the final era of human history and Jesus had commanded his disciples to take the Good News out to the very ends of the earth. That is not so much a geographic message as an indication as to the way the Kingdom is at work in every aspect of human living. It is our task to give witness to that deeper Truth about the world and our place in it.

Time is short – do not waste an opportunity

Judaism at the time this Gospel was written was struggling with the destruction of the Temple and the end of Jerusalem. Its response was to *build a hedge round the Torah*. They circled the wagons and therefore effectively buried the treasures of Judaism. The world was robbed of the gift of being able to see the reality of God at work in the people especially chosen to be His own covenanted people, chosen to be a *blessing* to all nations. And what better time to preach the goodness and power of God than when the physical, man-made structures of your religion have been smashed by pagan armies!

God is at work in history and not just acting on history

The woman of **Proverbs 31** models the alternative way set out by Jesus in the Gospel. She finds in every aspect of her life, a sign of the presence of God, opportunities to celebrate the Kingship of Yahweh and to take up her vocation of being God's co-worker (*ezer*). She was not just "doing things" or being the little woman at home. In the house, cooking, cleaning and caring for the children; out in the fields planting, harvesting and then going off to the market and bargaining for a good price. When she cared for her own or reached out to others, this woman radiated a message about God (*fear of the Lord*). That is what Jesus had in mind with the command to use our talents wisely.

We live in the era of the Holy Spirit, a time when God is preparing the world for its End. In the light of this, our vocation is to be living in a way that draws people to God through a union in Christ. This is the measure by which we evaluate what we do, how we speak and act and what plans we make for the future. It is the *foolish servant* who buries their "talents" and hopes that when the End comes, a loving and merciful God will simply praise them for their lack of faith and hope and for their refusal to be in collaboration with Him.

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