

Proverbs 31:10

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.

Analysis

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. This opening verse of the celebrated acrostic poem known as the 'Proverbs 31 woman' presents a rhetorical question that frames women of genuine virtue (Hebrew: chayil, often translated as 'excellence' or 'strength') as extraordinarily rare and invaluable. The question 'Who can find her?' suggests that such women are not common; they require active seeking and represent treasure more precious than the most valuable material possession of the ancient world. The juxtaposition of 'virtuous woman' with 'rubies' (Hebrew: peniynim) invokes the rarest, most expensive items known to the ancient Israelite economy. The Hebrew word chayil typically refers to strength, capability, and worthy achievement—it is the same word used for warriors and valiant leaders. Applied to a woman, it reframes virtue not as passive, ornamental propriety but as active strength, competence, and excellence. This woman is not merely avoiding vice; she is exemplifying positive virtues: capability, industry, wisdom, generosity, and courage. The verse establishes that genuine female virtue consists of these substantive qualities rather than physical beauty, social status, or passivity. The implied value statement—that such a woman is worth more than rubies—would have been counter-cultural in many ancient contexts, where women were often valued primarily for childbearing capacity or status as property transfers between male relatives. The rhetorical structure of the question invites the reader into a search, positioning the audience (presumably young men and women) as those seeking to understand and perhaps become such a person. The difficulty of the quest ('Who can find her?') establishes that achieving this ideal requires intention, discernment, and genuine effort. By

beginning the acrostic poem with this question, the poet signals that what follows is not a description of an easily attained standard but an exploration of exceptional human excellence. The verse teaches that women of genuine worth possess multidimensional virtue encompassing economic productivity, relational integrity, physical and mental discipline, and spiritual orientation.

Historical Context

Proverbs 31:10-31 represents one of the most significant passages in biblical literature addressing women's roles, worth, and capabilities. The passage takes the form of a Hebrew acrostic poem, where each of the 22 lines begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet—a literary device indicating completeness and careful composition. Such acrostic structures suggest deliberate, formal pedagogy, and they appear throughout biblical wisdom literature and other ancient Near Eastern texts. The 'Proverbs 31 woman' passage likely achieved its current form during the Second Temple period, though it may preserve earlier material. The portrait of the woman in Proverbs 31 has generated extensive interpretation across Jewish and Christian traditions, sometimes idealized, sometimes critiqued as oppressively demanding. The historical context reveals something more nuanced: this poem describes an economically independent, entrepreneurial woman engaged in commercial activity (buying and selling property, operating a textile enterprise), managing household slaves, engaging in philanthropy, and earning community respect. Such women certainly existed in the ancient Mediterranean world, though they likely represented a relatively privileged economic class. The poem celebrates not passive domesticity but active economic and social engagement. In ancient Israelite society, women's economic productivity through textile production (dyeing, weaving, selling) was highly valued and contributed significantly to household wealth. Women of sufficient property and talent could achieve considerable autonomy and influence. The Proverbs 31 poem reflects respect for such women while maintaining embedded assumptions about family hierarchy and women's primary responsibilities. The passage cannot be read as modern feminist liberation, but neither should it be dismissed as merely restrictive. It represents a sophisticated ancient Near Eastern perspective that acknowledged women's capabilities and contributions while working within patriarchal social structures.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. What does it mean that a virtuous woman's 'price is far above rubies'? In what ways can human worth be compared to material value, and in what ways does such comparison fail?
2. The Hebrew word chayil typically refers to strength and military valor. What implications follow from applying this word to describe women's virtue rather than using a term suggesting gentleness or passivity?
3. How might the difficulty implied by 'Who can find her?' be interpreted? Is the passage suggesting that such virtue is rare, or that seeking it requires proper perspective and values?
4. How has this verse been interpreted differently across Christian and Jewish traditions, and what historical and theological factors influenced those interpretations?
5. What contemporary applications of this verse would honor its original intent while avoiding either idealizing impossible standards or dismissing it as irrelevant patriarchal literature?

Interlinear Text

אִשָּׁת	מִפְנִים	יְמִין	מִכְּהָה:
woman	a virtuous	Who can find	for her price
H802	H2428	H4310	H4377
		H4672	H6443
		H7350	

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 19:14 (Parallel theme): House and riches are the inheritance of fathers: and a prudent wife is from the LORD.

Proverbs 12:4 (Parallel theme): A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband: but she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his bones.

Proverbs 18:22 (Parallel theme): Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD.

Proverbs 3:15 (Parallel theme): She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.

Ruth 3:11 (Parallel theme): And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman.

Proverbs 20:15 (Parallel theme): There is gold, and a multitude of rubies: but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel.

Job 28:18 (Parallel theme): No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls: for the price of wisdom is above rubies.

Proverbs 8:11 (Parallel theme): For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it.

Ecclesiastes 7:28 (Parallel theme): Which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found.