Who is a Virtuous Woman?
by Karen Mason

Karen holds an M. A. in Old Testament from Denver Seminary, and at present is a missionary to Haiti.

There's a burning desire within each of us women to be the best that we can be. That's what pushes us to take tennis lessons, sign up for continuing education, or join a Bible study. We want to grow for the better.

The problem, these days, is knowing what is better, what is the ideal. Some of us grew up strongly influenced by a philosophy of Christian womanhood whose ideal was the passive, “womanly” woman who makes her man “feel like a man”. As we grew older, we may have been influenced by the feminist ideal, the bra-burning, self-actualizing woman. What is the ideal we should be striving for?

The Bible sets forth an ideal and calls the ideal woman an eshet-chayil, which is the Hebrew for a “virtuous woman” (KJV) or a “wife of noble character” (NIV). This Hebrew expression occurs only three times in the Old Testament, but a study of these three passages is likely to reveal what the Bible supports as an ideal of Christian womanhood.

Eshet is the Hebrew word meaning “woman”. Chayil is a much more richly varied word which can mean “to be firm or to endure” (Job 20:21), physical strength (Ps 18:40), moral strength (Ps 18:32), army (Ex 14:4), or wealth (2 Ki 15:20). It seems that originally the sense of chayil was to stand firm, as would a soldier in battle. First standing for both the physical and moral strength required to stand firm, it then came to be applied to an army as a whole, and finally to the wealth owned by the so-called warrior class of Israelites. So we can suppose that an eshet-chayil is a person of strength (physical or moral) who stands firm. One primary quality of the Bible’s ideal is fortitude.

The first occurrence of eshet-chayil is Ruth 3:11. There Ruth is called an eshet-chayil by Boaz. The context is not army nor wealth: Ruth is an extremely poor, unmarried widow. The basis Boaz gives for her being an eshet-chayil is that she has done a great kindness (v 10). In fact, Ruth has just asked Boaz to marry her (cf the expression “spread the corner of your garment over me” in Eze 16:8) and to raise up offspring to Naomi, for the line of Elimelech (cf Ru 4:5, Dt 25:5-6).

Boaz mentions that everyone in Bethlehem thinks of Ruth as an eshet-chayil. From Boaz’s statement in verse 10, it’s clear that the townspeople recognized her as having done an earlier kindness. No doubt, they noted Ruth’s kindness in renouncing all past attachments (Ru 1:16-17) to assure provision for Naomi. Ruth is committed to Naomi’s welfare, to doing over and above what is right: not just the caring for her mother-in-law, even till death, but also a kinsman redeemer though she had other choices (v 10). Ruth displays the moral strength of a person who stands firm and lets nothing dissuade her from doing what will right a very wrong situation (Ru 1:21).

God had allowed misfortune to fall on Naomi (Ru 1), and, though God can make good things happen on His own (cf Ru 2:3), the eshet-chayil of God’s Kingdom is God’s salt on this earth. It seems that an important characteristic of the ideal woman is her determination to make right things happen in a wrong world.

Ruth was not a submissive victim of life’s circumstances; she was an assertive actor. Ruth was not content with whatever God brought along; she initiated change in righting what she felt was wrong. She didn’t have much to work with. She had thrown in her lot with a woman peculiarly unlucky (Ru 1:13); she was poor and widowed, with no visible means of support. She had struggles and worries. But she had the determination of the biblical ideal woman.

The second occurrence of eshet-chayil is Proverbs 12:4.

An eshet-chayil is her husband’s crown but a mevisha is like decay in his bones.

Hebrew poets were very fond of writing poetry in couplets that either repeated the same idea twice or expressed opposites. Here, it’s obvious that an eshet-chayil is the opposite of a mevisha. Mevisha literally means one causing shame. The word is a feminine singular participle, so the one causing the shame is the woman and the one who feels shame is the man. Most commonly, shame in the Old Testament is what a person feels when they’ve trusted what shouldn’t have been trusted (Job 6:19-20; Ps 25:2, 20; Is 30: 1-5; Jer 48:13; Hos 10:5-6; Mic 3:7; Zep 3:11-12). A man married to a mevisha feels shame because she is not trustworthy.

An eshet-chayil is the opposite. She is a woman who can be trusted. The verse is not specific about what she can be trusted to do or not to do — just that she can be trusted. Thus an ideal woman is not only determined, but also trustworthy.

The third and last occurrence of eshet-chayil is Proverbs 31:10-31. In this passage, we finally find a more specific description of an ideal woman, the
“virtuous woman”, the “wife of noble character”.  

Let’s look behind the tangible goods an 
esthet-chayil generates (food-v 14, field and vine- 
yard-v 16, money-v 18, bed coverings-v 22, fine 
clothes-v 24) to uncover the timeless qualities an 
esthet-chayil demonstrates (trustworthiness-v 11, 
constancy-v 12, diligence-vv 13, 24, 27, foresight- 
vv 14, 18, 21, 25, personal sense of responsibility-vv 
15, 19, shrewdness-v 16, energy-v 17, generosity-v 
20, self-love-vv 22, 25, wisdom-v 26, fear of God-v 
30).

Not all women everywhere can emulate the 
Israelite 10th century BC culture which this Proverbs 
31 woman exemplifies. All women cannot spin, wake 
before dawn, have servants, own property, be strong, 
do business, wear linen and purple, have children or 
be married. But what characteristics lie behind these 
activities which all women at all times can emulate? 
Let’s look at this passage section by section.

(vv 10-12) The first section is an exhorta- 
tion to young men to marry this sort of ideal woman 
for her trustworthiness (v 11) and her constancy (v 
12).

(vv 13-20) The next section emphasized the 
esthet-chayil’s shrewdness, her astute sagaciousness. 
These are all synonyms referring to the possession of 
a keen, searching intelligence combined usually with 
sound judgment. Shrewd stresses perceptiveness, 
hardheadedness, cunning and an intuitive knack in 
practical matters. Sagacious emphasizes more 
profound wisdom based on wide experience and gift 
for discernment and farsightedness. Astute suggests 
qualities associated with practical wisdom, such as 
acute understanding, insight, discernment, and 
immutability to being deceived. (American Heritage 
Dictionary—p 1200) The esthet-chayil has this astute 
practical mind. Indeed, an esthet-chayil is worth far 
more than rubies and ought to be found at all cost. 
(Pv 18:22) This section gives examples of her 
shrewdness.

(v 13) She doesn’t just get some wool and 
flax, but she selects them. The Hebrew word darash 
indicates that she carefully applies herself in earnest 
seeking. She demonstrates diligent application.

(vv 14-15) Though she owns a field and a 
vineyard (v 16), she trades for the food she doesn’t 
raise herself, just as a merchant ship would stop off at 
many ports trading around the Mediterranean Sea. 
To trade for what you need requires shrewd foresight: 
guessing your future needs. The result of her 
farsighted preparation is that she has enough food to 
feed all those she’s responsible for. (cf Pv 27:23-27)

(v 16) The word “considers” translates the 
Hebrew daman which means to purpose determinedly 
(Je 4:28) or to conspire a crafty scheme (Ps 31:3, Ps 
57:12). Though this esthet-chayil is not scheming 
evil, we note her foresighted planning and her 
shrewdness. The proof that she’s shrewd is that the 
field’s produce bears capital enough for her to 
reinvest in a vineyard (which in turn will produce 
more capital.) She preserves her investments 
contrary to the sluggard who can’t be bothered to 
consume them (Pv 12:27, Pv 19:24). She’s an 
initiator contrary to the sluggard who lets opportunity 
pass by (Pv 6: 9, 10).

(v 17) This verse is sandwiched between 
two verses that talk about the esthet-chayil’s shrewd 
business mind, so I assume the “tasks” here refer to 
hers business tasks. Her vigor and strength are 
business qualities she has. Her title, esthet-chayil, 
literally means a “woman of strength”. However, the 
word “strong” here is different from chayil . It’s the 
verb amets which means “to strengthen”, and can 
refer to economic power (Job 35:9), military strength 
(Ps 83:8), or moral fortitude (Dt 31:7). A rich 
woman with servants whose only physical activity 
mentioned is spinning or sewing and doing business 
might not be physically strong. More likely, her 
strength is moral fortitude: sheer determination, like 
Ruth’s determination to secure Naomi’s redemption 
by the near-kin. As a strong soldier who stands his 
ground in battle, so the esthet-chayil stands firm in her 
determination. Her strength is not in vain because 
she has the business acumen to back it up. Business 
“savvy” plus determination equals sure success.

(v 18) She’s most obviously determined to 
exact profit from her trading. In fact, she does so 
well in business that “her lamp does not go out at 
night: I don’t think she stays up all night planning 
her business strategies (Pv 23:4-5). This verse 
doesn’t comment on her sleep patterns but on her 
shrewdness! The esthet-chayil always has enough oil 
to keep her lamp burning. Because she has profited 
shrewdly, her lamp doesn’t go out, just as the 
lampstand in the Tabernacle burned all night (Ex 
27:20), just as the wise virgins had enough oil to keep 
their lamps burning all night (Mt 25:1-13). Her 
shrewdness and determination result in always 
having enough of whatever she needs.

(vv 19-20) Concerning shrewdness, Jesus 
said to his disciples: “Be as shrewd as snakes and as 
innocent as doves.” (Mt 10:16) In the Parable of the 
Talents (Mt 25), it was the shrewd servants who were 
rewarded. There is nothing wrong with shrewdness. 
However, there is something wrong with greed (Pv 
15:27, 28:22, 25, Mt 5:19-24). Shrewdness moti- 
vated by greed seeks only to accumulate wealth. 
Shrewdness motivated by kindness seeks to share (Dt 
15:7-11).

Verses 19 and 20 describe the esthet-chayil’s 
shrewdness as that which seeks to share. The verses 
interrelate her business activity (spinning) with her 
generosity. A literal translation of the two verses 
shows their relationship:
(v 19) Her hand stretches out (shalach) on the distaff and her palms hold firmly the spindle
(v 20) Her palm spreads out to the oppressed and her hand stretches out (shalach) to the poor.
These two verses are chiastically arranged. (Chiasm is the Hebrew poetic arrangement whereby similar words or thoughts are repeated in an a.b.b.a. form.) Her business activity (spinning) is thereby paired with her generosity.

This whole section (vv 13-20) emphasizes the eshet-chayil’s shrewdness: careful selection of wool and flax, careful trading for food which results in everyone being fed, careful selection of real estate which results in reinvestment of profits, determination to exact profits which result in having enough oil, business activity which results in having enough to share with others. This woman’s shrewdness naturally flows into generosity to those who need help.

May we today be like Ruth who didn’t allow the widow Naomi to return to Israel without a provider. May we be like Boaz who took notice of Ruth (though we’re never told she was a beauty) and provided food and redemption for her and Naomi (Ru 2:15, 19, 20). May we have the shrewdness of an eshet-chayil who manages her resources so that she can share.

(vv 21-27) This next section seems to emphasize the eshet-chayil’s diligence, her constant industry. (v 21) The ideal woman is so diligent she’s even prepared for snow, for the adverse circumstances of life. We can expect adversity in a less-than-ideal world. (Note Ruth who initiated redemption but couldn’t control all the unknowns [Ru 3:12-13].) Adversity happens regardless of how diligent we are (cf Job). An ideal woman diligently prepares even for adversity.

(vv 22-23) I suggest these two verses contrast the eshet-chayil with the adulteress of Proverbs 7 because the word maravdim, bed coverings, occurs only twice in the Bible: once here in verse 22 and once in Proverbs 7:16. Both the adulteress and the eshet-chayil care for their beds with bed coverings, but they care for themselves and their husbands in totally different ways. Whereas the adulteress of Proverbs 7 puts her rich cloth on her bed, the eshet-chayil wears it. She diligently cares for herself. Her diligence also profits her husband. Whereas the adulteress brings death (Pr 7:23, 27), the eshet-chayil brings repute and life. If her husband is seated with the elders, it seems likely to assume that he has already enjoyed a long life. He now sits (sitting=shabat) in Sabbath rest from his labors (retirement?) which allows him to further justice at the city gates (cf Ru 4:11). This woman’s diligence benefits herself and her husband.

(v 24) Her industry is such that when she’s provided for her household and herself, she turns to profit-making. She’s not only diligent, she’s as shrewd as always.

(v 25) This verse states the result of the eshet-chayil’s diligence: she faces the future without fear, because she is clothed (or characterized by) strength and dignity. Strength and dignity (hadar - "dignity" - is also translated "splendor") are often paired together (Pr 20:29, Ps 96:6) and they seem to indicate that a person’s splendor is having the strength or resources to achieve a task (Ps 45:4, Ez 27:10, Is 2:21, 22, Is 52:1). The eshet-chayil has the strength - the physical and mental resources - to accomplish her tasks. One of her tasks is to look into the future, apply the mental resource of foresight, and to prepare for what she sees. Then she laughs.

(v 26) Here we find words familiar to the rest of Proverbs: wisdom and instruction. Wisdom characterizes this woman’s speaking. As a wise speaker, the eshet-chayil teaches her children (Pr 1:8, 5:20, 29:15, Dt 5:6,7), confronts teachable adults (Pr 9:9, 17:10, 25:12), but leaves fools to their folly (Pr 9:7, 8, 15:12). She speaks only timely words (Pr 12:18, 25, 15:24, 25:11). Her words are honest (Pr 27:5, 28:23), not flattering (Pr 29:5, not gossipy (Pr 20:19), not numerous (Pr 10:19, 12:23).

She’s not only wise, but also loving. The word “faithful” is chesed, which implies the love from which springs faithfulness to a relationship. The Hebrew construction can mean either that she instructs faithfully (that her instruction springs from her faithfulness to relationships, cf Pr 20:6) or that she instructs faithfulness (how to act faithfully in relationships). Either way, I think this woman’s diligence is emphasized. She’s so committed to her relationships that she ever watches over her tongue. That’s work.

(v 27) In conclusion to this section on diligence, it’s said that the eshet-chayil vigilantly keeps watch over what goes on in her household. She is not a lazy sluggard. She epitomizes the diligence extolled in Proverbs. Diligence seems to refer especially to preparing for the future (Pr 5:6-8, 20:4, 21:5) by constant working (Pr 14:23, 18:9, 20:13) and by prizing one’s resources (Pr 12:27, 19:24). It’s hard to separate the two character qualities of diligence and shrewdness. Whereas diligence stresses constancy, shrewdness stresses intuitive sound judgment.

So what are this ideal woman’s timeless qualities? From her title “woman of strength”, we note her sheer determination. From the quality of shrewdness, we note her foresight, her astute intuition in practical matters, and her determined initiative. (cf also Tamar, Ge 38:26; Zipporah, Ex 4:24-26; Jael, Ju 4:21; Esther, Es 4:16; the Shunammite, II Ki 8:1-6; the widow, Lk 18:1-8; Abigail, I Sa 25:33)
her diligence, we note the constancy for which she cares for her household and herself, indeed all the relationships in which she's involved. We note too her foresight and the prizing of her resources. The results are wealth, enough to share, and enough to laugh at in the future, and praise (v 28-31).

This *eshet-chayil* is the ideal, but we mustn't assume she's flawless or perfect. Even the *eshet-chayil* is sinful (Pv 20:9) and subject to human error. She's also subject to God's sovereignty. God does what He wills, as we know from the case of Job (Job 2:10, 42:2).

The purpose of an ideal is not to discourage us but rather to furnish us with a goal. What then is our goal? To grow in the character qualities of the *eshet-chayil*: her determination, her trustworthiness, her shrewdness and initiative, her diligence, foresight, and the prizing of her resources. The virtuous woman is the one who possesses these qualities.

The President's Peregrinations

My daughter and I have just returned from mid-winter European wanderings, which included a visit to the tomb of Saint Mundita, the patron saint of single women. She lies in state in the Church of St. Peter in Munich, a testimony to God's blessing and power at work in the lives of single women. Why do not we in America so honor those who have chosen celibacy in their service for Christ?

In Milan we stood on the site of the Church of St. Thecla, the missionary associate of the Apostle Paul. Indeed, certain of the early Christian writers called her an apostle as well. The church was later demolished in order to enlarge the Church of St. Ambrose; but St. Thecla Street still leads to the site, and here Augustine was led to faith in Christ and baptized by Ambrose. The memory of Thecla is still strong in Milan.

The red star was being removed from the Parliament Building as we arrived in Budapest. At St. Wenceslas Square in Prague we watched people signing a petition to have the Russian troops removed. The grandmother of Good King Wenceslas is still revered as the first Christian princess of Czechoslovakia, a mighty instrument in bringing the nation to a knowledge of Christ. Her tomb occupies a special place of honor in the cathedral at Prague, near to the chamber in which Havel was recently elected President.

A kindly old gentleman hammered off into my hands a piece of the Berlin Wall to adorn the new CBIE office. He said he wanted someone to have it who would appreciate its significance. I assured him that we knew the significance of barriers torn down.

A series of ads run in a number of Christian magazines have argued for restoration of traditional roles for men and women. Their arguments should be given searching criticism, writes Ward Gasque.

Biblical Manhood and Womanhood - Stressing the differences
by W. Ward Gasque

W. Ward Gasque, the E. Marshall Sheppard Professor of Biblical Studies at Regent College, Vancouver, BC is the editor of the *New International Biblical Commentary* (Hendrickson).

A double-paged ad costing thousands of dollars began to appear two months ago in Christianity Today and other Christian magazines in the United States promoting what it alleges to be the “biblical teachings on the relationship between men and women, especially in the home and in the church.”

In answer to the question, “What do you stand for?” the response is given: “We hold that God made men and women to be equal in personhood and in value, but different in roles.” The splashy advertisement goes on to assert that “Scripture affirms male leadership in the home, and that in the church certain governing and teaching roles are restricted to men.”

According to the framers of the “Danvers Statement” - 26 men and 4 women are listed as “Council Members” and 18 men and 3 women, as “Board of Reference” - the idea of “God-given distinctions” between men’s and women’s roles in marriage and the church is under strong attack, not only by the “secular humanists” but also by books, articles and speeches stemming from within the evangelical Christian community.

Their goal is to restore traditional views, and they appeal for the support of the Christian community at large.

Male headship

The text of the “Danvers Statement” lists a ten-point statement of rationale, a five-point statement of purpose, and ten affirmations. The bottom line is “male headship” (which is interpreted as being in charge of making the decisions) in the family and in the church.

Scripture, it is suggested, promotes “the glad harmony... between the loving, humble leadership of redeemed husbands and the intelligent, willing support of that leadership by redeemed wives.”

“Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order...” “Adam’s headship in marriage was established