

“Royal Resolutions” (Prov. 31:1-9)

1. The Impetus for Justice (1-2)

- a. The King: King Lemuel could be a pseudonym for Solomon. The name means “belonging to God.” “*Lemuel* was no king of Israel (unless the name—‘belonging to God’—is a *nom-de-plume*). The ancient versions give some support to rsv’s *king of Massa* (see note on 30:1, under *The oracle*), and the language shows traces of foreign (but perhaps merely regional) dialect. The teaching is his mother’s; but there is no hint that she was from Israel.”¹
- b. The Queen Mother: No matter if it is Solomon or another, it is the counsel this king received from his (apparently) queen mother. If not a Jewish king, the emphases on sober ruling avoiding both women and wine certainly parallels the balance of Scripture. “In Hebrew proverbs, as opposed to other ancient Near Eastern proverbs, mothers are mentioned as those engaged in the instruction of their children (see comments at 1:8). However, this is the only place where we actually hear the voice of the mother independently of that of the father. The topic of her conversation is something that a wise mother, especially the wise mother of a leader, would want to drive home to her child: women and drink are two large temptations to a man with power and money.”²
- c. The Prince: “what,” “what,” “what”? could mean “listen...listen...listen” = preventative; or “no...no...no” = corrective. Either way the repetition is employed to reveal an intimate emotional, authoritative, benevolent relationship which pleads for the prince to heed wisdom.
- d. The Church: We can receive this admonition as if from the King of kings, Son of David, and His Bride – mother church because the canon of Scripture is recognized and disseminated by Her!

2. Avoid Licentious Living (3)

- a. Women: If indeed this was Solomon, he did not heed his mother’s plea for Solomon serves as a cautionary example of how correct this queen was. Read 1 Ki. 11:1-10.
- b. Word Play? to “*give*” away “*strength*” is to dissipate physical energies and personal wealth—the word can mean both; “*ways*” with a slight change in Hebrew spelling becomes “*loins*,” which is a closer parallel to “*strength*” and keeps the focus on sexual excess with its destructive powers.³
- c. Wife of Christ: Like the instructed beloved prince, we are to remain pure in our lifestyles and what is obviously pertinent is monogamy, purity, and fidelity in marriage.

3. Avoid Intoxication (4-7)

- a. Commission (4-5)
 - i. Repeated prohibitive words mark the importance of her warning.
 - ii. Kings nor princes have a legitimate prerogative to indulge in drink.
 - iii. Upholding the law cannot be compromised.
 - iv. Integrity of justice must be maintained.
 - v. The afflicted are those who need justice yet perversion of such has always been an issue. Too often has the hand of justice been perverted due to bribe, neglect, intoxication, etc.
- b. Compassion (6-7)
 - i. Literal Interpretation: Some quite respectful commentaries take this literally rather than sarcastically and thus stretch credulity too far. They maintain that the queen is

RSV American Revised Standard Version, 1952.

¹ Kidner, D. (1964). *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 17, p. 176). InterVarsity Press.

² Longman, T., III. (2006). *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Proverbs* (p. 538). Baker Academic.

³ Hubbard, D. A., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1989). *Proverbs* (Vol. 15, p. 487). Thomas Nelson Inc.

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speaking of those, not unlike Jesus who was offered a dulling sip of wine and vinegar (Mat. 27:34) on the Cross, receiving such dulling libations so as to ease misery in the shadow of death. However, this is not a literal command to “give strong drink” to the one in death’s grip, although such dulling narcotics can be legitimately used in such cases e.g. those in great pain on their death beds. Furthermore, v. 7 clearly describes those who are in poverty and wanting to forget their misery, not those in continual anguish of pain.

- ii. Sarcastic Interpretation: Not unlike God’s sarcastic instruction for Israel to commence with their burnt offerings (Jer. 7:21), this is better interpreted as a sarcastic acknowledgment that if anyone needed strong drink it would be for those whom the prince is to protect. This interpretation would thus urge him to avoid strong drink so that he could alleviate their need of strong drink. I only found one or two commentaries out of more than two dozen which agree. Waltke is most articulate in his comments.

The command *let him drink* (*yišteh*, v. 7) further develops verse 6. This second proverb pair warning against intoxicants also consists of both a “command” (this time positive, v. 6), and a reason (v. 7).⁴⁸ Kings have no reason to desire intoxicants (v. 4), but the perishing, who are bitter from lack of food, may have reason to want it. Nevertheless, the command to give intoxicants to all who are dying of hunger to anesthetize them permanently is sarcastic,⁴⁹ not a proposed welfare program to provide “free beer ... as an opiate to the masses.”⁵⁰ The indefinite plural *give* (*tenu*) shows that the queen mother is not giving her son a specific command as in vv. 3, 4, 8. If taken literally, her command to give *intoxicants* (*sekar*, see 20:1) *to the one who is perishing* (*le’obed*, see 10:28) and *wine* (*weyayin*, see 20:1) *to those who are bitter* (*le mare napes*, see n. 31) would be completely out of harmony with wisdom. The perishing and miserable in verse 6 are defined in verse 7 as suffering from grinding poverty. Drowning one’s sorrows in drink solves nothing; its anesthetic effects merely deepen the drinker’s inability to face his problems (see 20:1; 23:29ff.). Instead, the following proverb pair specifically commands the king to deliver the poor from their miserable poverty. To offer drink without that material help would be cynical. The sarcastic command aims to debunk intoxicants as useless. Their only possible value is to knock out the poor and to keep the addicts permanently in a drunken stupor. To make the point by negatives, the mother is not recommending intoxicants as either medicine,⁵¹ or a reminder to show love,⁵² or a stimulant,⁵³ or to bring conviviality and cheerfulness to the dying.⁵⁴

- c. Conclusion: We, the children of the great King, are to pursue justice and live soberly (Eph. 5:18) and walk in the light (Eph. 5:8). In fact, I discovered that Eph. 5 parallels Prov. 31 →

⁴⁸ The switch from negative to positive commands also occurs in 26:4–5.

⁴⁹ The command n 19:27 is also sarcastic. Meinhold (*Sprüche*, p. 519) indirectly supports a literal interpretation from a stipulation in the Babylonian Talmud to offer wine mixed with myrrh to those who have been sentenced to death so that their conscience will be dulled, and the pain of dying will be weakened (Sanhedrin 43a; cf. Mk 15:23 *passim*). However, it is one thing to stupefy the dying, and quite another to knock out the living to forget the misery of grinding poverty (v. 7).

⁵⁰ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NAC; Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1993), p. 246.

⁵¹ Lit. “bitter ones in soul.” *Nepeš* is a genitive of location (*IBHS*, pp. 147f, p. 9.5.2f) and designates their emotional state due to deprivation (see B. K. Waltke, *nāphash*, *TWOT*, 2:589). It matches *w* in v. 4. Against Kutler (“A ‘Strong’ Case for Hebrew MAR, *UF* 16 [1984] 111–118), who argued that *mar* here means “strong,” cf. the critique of the alleged root in D. Pardee (*UF* 10 [1978] 249–288).

⁵² Pace McKane, *Proverbs*, p. 410.

⁵³ Pace C. Bridges, *An Exposition of Proverbs* (Evansville: Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1959; preface 1846), p. 618.

⁵⁴ Pace V. P. Hamilton, *TWOT*, 2:926, s.v. *shākar*.

⁵⁵ Pace p. P. Jenson, *NIDOTTE*, 4:114, s.v. *škr*.

⁴ Waltke, B. K. (2005). [*The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15–31*](#) (pp. 508–509). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

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- i. They begin with the parent’s love.
 - ii. They both presume a commission for the beloved.
 - iii. They admonish fidelity, sobriety, and equity.
 - iv. They end with a picture of marital blessings.
 - v. We might title both passages e.g. “Admonishment for The King’s/Queen’s Beloved”
4. Enact Sober Justice (8-9)
 - a. Speak for the Speechless: Those who do not have a voice e.g. unborn. Those whose voice has been silenced e.g. the censored. Those coerced into silence via perverse justice e.g. non-disclosure agreements, etc.
 - b. Opine for the Oppressed: The poor and needy are not to be favored (Exod. 23:3; Lev. 19:15) but as stated in this collection (Prov. 24:23), equity of justice is to be sought. Therefore, justice demands “judge righteously” v. 8b. As Jesus said, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (Jn. 7:24 cf. Mat. 7:2). This is contra to Marxist redistribution from rich to the poor. The context is clear viz. blind weights of justice so as not to pervert justice in favor of anyone cf. Deut. 16:19. When those of a lower \$ classification vie for social policies which redistribute \$ from legitimate wage earners to another select group and or further disenfranchise another group of people – this is a perversion of justice and the church cannot stand with such. Corrupt governance sees little benefit from helping those who speak against it and thus the leaders become oppressors rather than ‘ministers’ (see Ro. 13:4 NKJV). →
 - c. Highways and Hedges: Ministry – which is precisely what princes and kings are to perform – is not sanitized and neat. Rather than the places of prominence, we are to go to those who are willing to repent and receive the King’s invitation and commission (Lu. 14:21-23). We enact justice when we present the Gospel because we proclaim Christ crucified for the righteous payment for our sins’ debt.