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“How to be a Biblical Wife”
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When evangelical Christians want guidance about living their lives, the first place they go is the Bible. After all, they believe the Bible contains God's truth for human interaction as well as divine worship.

So, what is the Bible's guidance for how to be a good wife? There are lots of comments about being a mother, but surprisingly few rules and only a little more advice for how to be a wife. The New Testament has little more than an admonition for women to obey their husbands. That is such a broad and bland generalization that it can be interpreted in almost any direction one wishes.

Most of the Old Testament references to wives feature marriage rules, as in Leviticus 18. The best place to look is Proverbs 31:11-31. Here, the wife is an independent actor, even though subordinate to the husband. She should buy and sell land, and engage in farming, trade and commerce. She is expected to provide sage counsel to her husband and kind words to her family, feed and clothe them, and bring her husband "profit."

Biblical stories about specific wives might also be a source of guidance. But which ones? And which actions should one emulate? Even if we eliminate "bad" wives like Jezebel, the "good" wives often do things we would not approve of in today's world. Abraham's wife Sarah and both of Jacob's wives (Leah and Rachel) had their husbands get children with their slave women. Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, committed adultery with David, who later became her husband.

There are, of course, many prominent women in the Bible who are not known as wives. Some women were prophets, such as Miriam during the Exodus and Hulda at the time of King Josiah. They were respected and listened to, but provide no model for how to be a good wife.

God intervened in the lives of some biblical wives, but usually with regard to motherhood. Angels visited both Samson's unnamed mother and Ishmael's mother, Hagar, to assure them about their children's future. Samuel's mother, Hannah, received a divine blessing when God opened her womb.

And don't forget Deborah, who led the people Israel as a "judge." She even gathered an army, appointed Barak as its general, and defeated the Canaanite army of Hazor.

She was respected by the Israelites and led them for many decades, but nothing appears about her behavior as a wife.

That brings us to the most famous woman of scripture, Mary, the mother of Jesus. In the four gospels, she is nearly always referred to as a mother or a mother-to-be, but never as a wife. The stories tell how Joseph cares for her, but not how she cares for or relates to Joseph.

The two nativity stories describe her as a pregnant, yet an unmarried girl who gives birth. Elsewhere in the gospels, she appears as the adult Jesus' mother, sometimes with her other children, sometimes with some disciples or women of Jesus' followers.

Mary has become an important symbol for Christianity, especially for Catholicism, but her imagery is almost completely related to aspects of childbirth and motherhood. She is rarely held up as a model wife, because there are no tales of her and her relationship to her husband Joseph.

Indeed, to preserve the belief in Mary's eternal virginity, the Catholic Church declared that the people clearly labeled in the gospels as Jesus' "brothers" were actually cousins. In this view, Mary did not even have wifely conjugal relations.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the role of women in Christianity and in societies dominated by Christianity is controversial. The Bible, the textual foundation of the religion, provides little guidance for what wives should do or how wives should behave. Each religious culture must figure it out on its own.

Maybe Proverbs 31 should be used as a guide, with married women expected to both look after their household and to engage in commercial activity outside the home. Does this mean that Proverbs anticipated today's American society where, rightly or wrongly, women seem to both pursue a job in the workplace and look after the family at home?