

## THE PLAUSIBILITY OF PROVERBS 31 AS FINAL PARENTAL (MOTHERLY) INSTRUCTION

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### ABSTRACT

Proverbs 31 has been viewed as two separate poems: 31:1-9, the words of Lemuel's mother, and 31:10-31, an acrostic poem on the capable wife. Careful analysis of the two poems shows that these were juxtaposed by the redactor as a single composition through lexical and thematic links. It is equally observable that there is no title between the two compositions. Other than the shift in style where the first nine verses are prescriptive and the final 22 verses are descriptive, there is no indication to treat the two as separate. From these indicators, this paper seeks to argue for the plausibility of the final chapter as the final parental (motherly) instruction in which these formerly independent compositions are juxtaposed by the redactor for that specific purpose. This view will obviously yield some interpretational implications on the book of Proverbs that we would like to table for ongoing analysis.

### INTRODUCTION

The last chapter of the book of Proverbs has traditionally been viewed as having two independent sections 31:1-9 and 31:10-31.<sup>2</sup> The first section accordingly has a superscription attributing it to a queen mother's warning to the king (her son). The second does not have a superscription at all and most translators supply one.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> The LXX does not place the two poems consecutively as in the Hebrew text. The order of the Hebrew verses observed in LXX is as follows 31:1-9; 25:1-28; 26:1-28; 27:1-27; 28:1-28; 29:1-27; 31:10-31 (see Lichtenstein 1982:202 cf. Koptak 2003:674).

<sup>3</sup> NIV – Epilogue: The Wife of Noble Character; ESV – The Woman who Fears the Lord;

reading of the final chapter of the book of Proverbs has been influenced by this supplying of a superscription.<sup>4</sup> However, if Waltke (2005:501, cf. Koptak 2003:672, Kitchen 2006:710, and Wendland 2006:1251) is right in assuming the superscription in 31:1 for the entire chapter, then it stands to reason that the second section usually treated as distinct from the first can be attributed to the same speaker. This paper seeks to explore the plausibility of single authorship/speaker for Chapter 31 and the interpretational implications for the entire book.

## PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ON THE EPILOGUE

The epilogue to the book of Proverbs (31:10-31) has been regarded as the epitome of wisdom portraiture. It is rather surprising that the book ends with a poem decidedly dedicated to a woman when the generic orientation throughout the account is masculine.<sup>5</sup> However, the feminine portraiture is reminiscent of the woman motif through which the gender of the noun “wisdom” (*hokmah*) is determined as well as the feminine personification of wisdom in 1:20-33, 8:1-36, and 9:1-12. In similar vein, “Folly” who is wisdom’s nemesis is feminine and represented as strange and inappropriate (9:13-18). Invariably, Folly’s equally undesirable counterparts are variously depicted through women of loose morals (2:16-19; 5:3-6; 6:24-35; 7:6-27). Undoubtedly, the feminine portraiture is strategically utilised as a teaching aid (3:13-18; 4:7-9; 7:4) and, simultaneously, to project the mother as a co-teacher (1:8; 6:20; 10:1). With such an array of feminine portraiture, it should not be surprising that the final chapter presents Lemuel’s mother as a speaker and the exceptional woman as a climax of the account.

Apple’s (1991:175) comment is valid at this juncture where the book of Proverbs as a whole is castigated as “heeding the voice of parents” in order to gain wisdom.

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NASB – Description of a Worthy Woman; NKJV – The Virtuous Wife et al.

<sup>4</sup> This represents a typical case where paratext influences a reading. Goswell (2008:673) defines paratext as everything in a text other than the words, that is to say, those elements that are adjoined to the text but are not part of the text itself if the “text” is limited strictly to the words. The paratext of Scripture embraces features such as the order of the biblical books, the names assigned to the different books, and the differing schemes of textual division within the books

<sup>5</sup> See the repeated use of the vocative “my son” (1:10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:10, 20; 5:1, 7, 20; 6:1, 3, 20; 7:1; 19:22; 23:15, 19, 26; 24:13, 21; 27:11; 31:2).

Gutstein (1999:36) instantiates this comment by attributing that wisdom was “acquired through study [and] therefore, whoever aspired to it needed a teacher”. Traditionally, the teacher would have been understood as wise men who, according to Jeremiah 18:18 (cf. superscriptions in Pr 22:17; 24:23) stood alongside priests and prophets as counsellors in everyday matters. If Apple is right in the assertion above, parents also played a key role in the instruction of their children hence the queen mother’s warning in 31:1-9. In this estimation, wisdom would not necessarily be the exclusive privilege of the professional “wise men”, but accessible to all. For this reason, proverbial wisdom mostly relates to matters of everyday life. In line with this thinking, Gutstein (1999:36) deduces from the range of meanings associated with wisdom the following:

[Wisdom is] a way of thinking and an attitude toward life that accentuated human experience, reason and morality, along with a quasi-secular emphasis upon man as man, with all his frailties and limitations. Its objective was to guide the life of the individual and his or her social relationships.

The book of Proverbs by design is instructional, which can be derived from the preamble (1:2-7).<sup>6</sup> Thus, the instructional outlook needs to be traceable even in the closing chapter which, when taken from an impressionistic viewpoint, 31:10-31 may appear to deviate from. Fox (1997:613) introduces the book of Proverbs as follows:

The book of Proverbs, read as a whole, presents a main topic amidst its numerous and diverse maxims and observations. This topic, scarcely touched on elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern Wisdom Literature, is *wisdom* – not just wise behaviour or wise teachings but wisdom itself, the human intellectual power, both as knowledge and as a faculty. The book of Proverbs is not only about doing; it is about *knowing*. This concern, even more than the specifics of the teachings, demands our attention if we wish to understand the special message and purpose of Israelite Wisdom Literature.

If wisdom has been presented in the feminine construct throughout the book, and the book itself is about desiring wisdom as stated above, there is, understandably, a

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<sup>6</sup> See Ndogo (2011:17-27); cf. Sandoval (2007:455-73) on the prologue and which sets the instructional motif of the book of Proverbs.

deliberate intimation between wisdom and the virtuous woman. In McKane's (1970:666) language of the woman as of "inestimable worth", the superlative language employed in the final poem makes her highly desirable. McKane (1970:666) adduces the description here as a "paradigm for brides-to-be rather than [simply] the description of a wife of quality". His line of thinking suggests the woman herself as a beneficiary of instruction hence the rarity of her qualities. With 31:1-9 warning the son about the dangers of illicit sex among other concerns, 31:10-31 is juxtaposed to offer a legitimate alternative. Is there justifiable reason for reading 31:1-31 as a single unit?

### **BASES FOR SINGLE UNIT APPROACH TO PROVERBS 31**

We can reaffirm, then, that while absence of a superscription in 31:10-31 is odd and inconsistent with the rest of the book, that leaves room for further inquiry. On the absence of a superscription, Waltke (2005:501) posits that "if Lemuel's mother is not the author of 'The Valiant Wife', [then] it is a unique orphan in Proverbs – that is, it lacks a superscription ascribing its authorship" as would be the case elsewhere (see 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; 30:1). However, even if we were to separate the two sections, 31:1-9 is unreasonably brief as a stand-alone composition compared with other sections in the account (see 1:8-9:18; 10:1-22:16; 22:17-24:22; 25:1-29:27; 30:1-33). Could this attribute the capable wife (31:10-31) as a continuation of the words of Lemuel's mother? Is there fertile ground from within the composition on which this thesis can be derived?

A number of objections can be levelled against such a thesis on reading the last chapter in the book of Proverbs as a single unit, to which I will respond. The first almost assumes the two as separate and independent units. Hurowitz (2001:209) reveals that a number of commentators simply handle these two sections as separate units where paratext influences their reading.<sup>7</sup> Others regard 31:10-31 as an appendix to the entire collection.<sup>8</sup> In both views, the idea of a single unit is not considered. This does not necessarily mean implausibility of the idea but simply lack of consideration.

The second objection arises out of the acute shift in style that is quite apparent

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<sup>7</sup> See Bridges (1981:619); Farmer (1991:123); Atkinson (1996:167); Perdue (2000:274-275); Schwab (2009:654).

<sup>8</sup> See Lane (2000:381-405) who regards Chapters 30-31 as comprising the three appendices.

where the complete acrostic utilised in 31:10-31 is absent in 31:1-9. The acrostic seems to provide perimeters for 31:10-31 to be read as an independent unit. Related to this compositional aspect is the fact that 31:1-9 is prescriptive through its unambiguous use of the imperative mood, and spoken in the second person masculine singular. On the contrary 31:10-31, which utilises the third person feminine singular, is descriptive where implicit statements are tactically employed to draw out personal reflection. In response to these, we should point out that Whybray (1994:157) has provided ample evidence on deliberate editorial arrangement towards the composition of the book of Proverbs. This way, even if 31:1-9 and 31:10-31 were originally independent units, editorial superimposition can account for a rationale (maybe unknown to us) for their juxtaposed arrangement as a single unit. Besides, while the queen mother could command her son on issues of personal conduct by appealing to her motherly privilege (31:2), she realises that she could not impose a wife on him, hence the shift in style, in my view, from prescriptive to descriptive.

The third objection arises out of the simple observation that Lemuel as king sits on the royal throne, but the husband in 31:23 sits at the city gates among the elders who oversee legal and judicial affairs (see Dt 22:15; Joshua 20:14; Ruth 4:11; Lm 5:14; Amos 5:12). Again my own view is that the description in 31:23 is slanted towards how she advances his status as opposed to his self-earned accolades. Keil & Delitzsch (2002:487) correctly observe when they comment:

She advances the estimation and the respect in which her husband is held. He has, in the gates where the affairs of the city are deliberated upon, a well-known, reputable name; for there he sits, along with the elders of the land, who are chosen into the council of the city as the chief place of the land, and has a weighty voice among them.

There is also nothing to suggest that a king could not sit among the elders at the gates. On the contrary, there are occasional references to the king taking his throne to the gate (see 1 Kings 22:10 cf. 2 Chr 18:9; Jr 38:7).

The fourth objection questions the purpose that the epilogue as a single unit would serve. It seems to simply list the qualities of a capable wife preceded by words by Lemuel's mother which are incoherent. To respond, the book is set as a guide to the individual through preparation for all of life's eventualities as a blessing to oneself and to others. In this epilogue, the reader is not appealed to or asked to do anything at least

in 31:10-31. This is simply a description which departs from the earlier portraiture of women constructs, as Wright III (2004:242) correctly observes, where the ideal woman is to be sought (1:20-33; 3:13-24; 5:15-23; 8:1-36; 9:1-12) and the loose or strange woman is to be avoided (2:16-19; 5:3-14; 6:20-35; 7:6-27; 9:13-18; 23:26-28). There are also frequent but sporadic wisdom sentences pertaining to “a wife” which command attention (12:4; 18:22; 19:13, 14; 21:9 cf. 21:19; 25:24; 27:15 and 30:23). The question to ask is what role the epilogue plays as a closure to this account?

### **READING PROVERBS 31 AS A CLOSURE FOR THE BOOK**

Masenya (1997:60) represents the common notion on the placement of the epilogue to book of Proverbs when she writes:

Our paean is an acrostic poem whose problematic position of closing the whole book makes it difficult to read. I refer to the poem’s position at the end of the book as being problematic because of the nature of the book as a whole, as comprised of a variety of main sections. We may ask, for example, whether 31:10-31 is a fitting conclusion to the whole book, or whether it is an appendage to the book.

A stand-alone analysis in my view leads to such perceptions. To underscore this, we continue with Masenya (1997:60) as she writes:

My argument would therefore be that the portrait is not that of a real woman but an ideal that people (men) had to strive for, an ideal based on certain expectations which society had about women. This understanding implies that we are dealing here with a male text addressed to a male audience.

Masenya’s objection here would hold water if, for example, we know for sure that the composer or speaker was male. Katharine Dell (2006:86) asserts that the “purpose of this section seems simply to be the listing of qualities in a woman that a man ought to look for when it comes to choosing a wife: discussion of good and bad women from a man’s point of view runs through the wisdom literature, both Israelite and Egyptian”.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary if our argument holds that the speaker is female, then the ideological

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<sup>9</sup> See Fox (1983:219-228) on Israelite and Egyptian love poetry.

objection to the ostensibly androcentric portraiture of the capable woman is nullified.

Assuming for a moment that it is Lemuel's mother speaking, the subject matter in 31:10-31 appropriately represents a typical motherly concern for a son who is on the verge of making such a life changing decision.<sup>10</sup> The speaker, based on the authority with which she speaks, presents the portraiture as a first-hand experience on her part. The queen mother on that basis is seemingly able to meticulously represent the ideal wife from such a personal perspective on the one hand, and on the other as parental (motherly) advice. Interestingly, the woman motif is featured in 31:3 as part of the motherly admonition. Proverbs 31:3 pertains to undesirable women whose abhorrence is echoed by the deliberate absence of a detailed description. By contrast 31:10-31, according to Lichtenstein (1982:202), is wholly devoted to the subject of a specific kind of woman who undoubtedly meets the approval of the rather concerned queen mother and by implication that of the son. It is therefore conceivable that Crooks (1954) entitles this portraiture "The Marriageable Maiden of Proverbs 31:10-31", suggesting advisory sentiments.

In a middle-eastern culture where marriages were arranged and the parents (father) was responsible for the bride-price (cf. Gn 24:10), it seems in these settings that parental satisfaction in the qualities of the candidate indeed mattered. This concern echoes Abraham's holding his servant to an oath ensuring that he would choose a wife for Isaac from among his people known by his estimation for better qualities than the Canaanites among whom he had settled (see Gn 24:1-4). Perhaps for similar reasons, Lemuel's mother was concerned for her son's wife-to-be. Before we can confirm our thoughts, there are some prior considerations necessary to take into account. We now turn our attention to these.

### **Hermeneutical considerations**

The book of Proverbs is known as a collection of collections.<sup>11</sup> The idea of a final

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<sup>10</sup> Yoder (2003:428) argues that the socio-economic conditions described reflect the Persian period realities and not those necessarily true of Israelite women. Because of the difficulty of dating this poem or equating its description with Israelite women, alternative readings have been suggested such as placement of the portraiture outside of the Israelite era, or reading the portraiture as symbolic. Lang (2004:184-207) argues for a sapiential treatise which offers young people guidance to better cope with the realities of life.

<sup>11</sup> Hence the various sections attributed to various collectors (Solomon 1:1; 10:1-24:34; Hezekiah 25:1-29:27 and king Lemuel 31:1; and other wise men, 22:1-24:34; 25:1-29:27;

redactor who compiled the material in the fashion we have is largely endorsed.<sup>12</sup> However, the redactor's organising principle remains a matter of scholarly doubts and debates. There are three main camps that emerge - one that advocates the wisdom school setting, and the second a familial context and a third that posits a cooperation of the two. To a large extent, the first camp is summarily swayed by the similarities between sections of the book of Proverbs and Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope* particularly in Proverbs 22:17-24:22.<sup>13</sup> It is argued that the connections are similarly endorsed between the two bodies of literature from the lexical parallels particularly the use of the vocative "my son".<sup>14</sup> This term of endearment used of the addressee in the Egyptian context is largely regarded as a normal instructional reference by the teacher of his students (Kidner 1985:19).<sup>15</sup> On the strength of these similarities the wisdom school setting is therefore conceivable.

The second camp argues for a home-based nurturing for the book of Proverbs particularly for the material in chapters 1-9 (see Dell 2006; Ndogo 2007). Critics have raised objections to this thinking mostly on the basis of the wisdom school notion which in the Israelite context is linked mostly to royal activities.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the protestations can be cleared by distinguishing between the origins of the book of Proverbs and the redactional activities. On the one hand, the origins of the book depict a variety of social contexts as reasonable bases for the coining of the wisdom statements that were passed on orally as they enjoyed currency among the people. This accounts for the familial, societal, royal, sapiential, floral and faunal et al. flavours

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30:1-33).

<sup>12</sup> See Ndogo (2011) on the organising principle for the book of Proverbs.

<sup>13</sup> See Shupak (2005:203-20) who reviews the relationship between the Egyptian composition and the book of Proverbs.

<sup>14</sup> See Apple (2011:175) on the use of the vocative as a call to heed parental advice.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, there are comparable ANE usages of the vocative. For example in the Instructions of Surupag of approximately 2000 B.C. we read "My son, you should not sit alone in a chamber with a married woman". See also the words of Ahiqar an Assyrian from about 700 B.C. which read "My son! let the wise man beat thee with a rod, but let not the fool anoint thee with sweet salve" (cited in Pritchard 1978:428).

<sup>16</sup> Hill and Walton (1991:257) observe that some biblical scholars indeed endorse this idea, and say that "the wisdom of Proverbs was in effect a school textbook for the royal family and the elite society. They were trained in wisdom so that in future they might be wise and productive leaders of the next generation of Israelites." This would make sense in view of the decidedly royal flavoured proverbs (Pr 16:12-15; 20:8, 26; 21:1) and association of proverbial collections with royalty (Solomon 1:1; 10:1; Hezekiah 25:1; Agur 30:1; Lemuel 31:1).

within the text. In the pre-literate state, proverbial wisdom was authorless in the sense that a statement of observed phenomena succinctly expressed became universally endorsed in line with divine propositions. These observations from various life situations were coined in such a way to either be instructional or reflective. The literate stage that ensued was simply a collection and preservation process. It is feasible that the titles of the collections to associate proverb collections as a royal sponsorship which does not necessarily prescribe authorship. Apple (1991:175) views Solomonic authorship as an attempt to give the book status and credibility. The case in point would be the Proverbs of Solomon copied by men of king Hezekiah (25:1). Macatangay (2011:188) comments:

The roots of biblical wisdom may have been traditional tribal wisdom. It is not unlikely that many proverbs circulated and were transmitted orally among ordinary and non-literate folks before there was a monarchical court or school of the sages to select, collect and preserve them in a written form.

On the other hand, the redactional process was a deliberate arrangement of the variously preserved collections of proverbial wisdom utilising an organising principle as hinted in the preamble (Pr 1:2-7). Other indications of deliberate arrangement of the material include the following:

- *Inclusio* through the “fear of the Lord motif” in 1:7 and reiterated in 9:10 & 31:30.
- The deliberate placement of the “woman” motif in the Prologue 1:8-9:18 and the Epilogue 31:10-31.
- Literary design from wisdom poem (1-9) which is mostly instructional to wisdom sentence (10-31) mostly prudential.
- Subject matter which reflects thought development and movement from personal and character issues (1-9) to societal and life orientation (10-31).
- Reiteration of the familial context as the instructional forum in which both parents either individually or corporately address their son (Pr 1:8; 3:12; 4:1, 3; 6:20; 10:1; 13:1; 15:5, 20; 17:21, 25; 19:13, 26; 20:20; 23:22; 27:10; 28:7, 24; 29:3; 30:17).
- The advancement of genre in depth from the prescriptive statements mostly in 1-9, to the descriptive statements in the remainder of the account.

The third camp accommodates the school and home collaboration. Green (2006:221)

surmises that the “teachers realize the primacy of parents in shaping the lives of their young”. With this in view, they reinforce parental influence with every means at their disposal.

With these in mind, it follows that only the final redactor, despite the agenda of the individual collectors, (and if the post exilic date is likely), sought some cohesion in his/her arrangement with specific recipients and perhaps a specific occasion in mind. The preamble (1:1-7) through the *lamed* prefix in 2a, 2b, 3a 4a and 6a, indicates the pedagogical purpose for the book “to know” “wisdom” which is explicated through the 8 synonyms that ensue. The book has in mind a primary audience in 1:4 “the youth” נַעַר (*nā'ār*) which designates a boy or male child, as in a child of any age from infancy, through weaning, to late adolescence (Swanson 1997). Interestingly, the text parallels the youth to the “simple” פְּתִי (*pěti*), common wisdom jargon for persons that are easily deceived or persuaded, showing lack of wisdom and understanding, yet having some capacity to change this condition (Swanson 1997). Either way, the redactor intimates in his/her selected audience those in desperate need for gaining wisdom because of their immaturity and vulnerability. In saying so, the redactor also implicates his/her account as resolutely designed to address the young and simple towards gaining חֵכְמָה “wisdom” here understood as the capacity to understand and so have skill in living, or implying adherence to a set standard (Swanson 1997).

Interestingly, besides the “young and simple” as the primary audience, the redactor also invites the “wise and understanding” person as the secondary audience (1:5) to equally reflect on the contents of the book. Thus, the book of Proverbs by and large addresses the issues that gives one capacity for daily living through a divine orientation as indicated in 1:7. We can therefore argue that by 31:9, the necessary teachings towards being skilled for life itself have been covered. Therefore, we propose that the Proverbs 31:10-31 which portrays a virtuous wife only serves to epitomise the implied complimentary partner envisaged in the instructional scheme of this account. For this reason the acrostic poem beginning with the rhetorical question “A valiant wife who can find?” (31:10a) should be better understood in our thesis as asking who deserves a wife of such qualities who in actuality is a rarity. Significantly, Waltke (2006:521) espouses that the rhetoricity of the question “aims to awaken within the audience the desire to find such a wife or *to be like her*” (emphasis added). Why would the motherly instructions be significant as a closure of the book?

### Considerations for motherly instruction

In view of the plausibility of Proverbs 31 as a single composition, Lichtenstein (1982) was probably the first scholar to posit grounds that account for the editorial juxtaposition of the two distinct poems. We will not rehearse his findings that have been variously confirmed by other scholars (Murphy 1998; Hurowitz 2001;<sup>17</sup> Waltke 2006; Wendland 2006), but suffice to point out his basis (1982:202-11) rests on three fronts:

- 1) Thematic and verbal links -  $\text{הַשָּׂאָה}$  (*'iššāh*) 31:3,10;  $\text{הַיֵּל}$  (*hāyil*) 31:3, 10, 29;  $\text{אֲנִי}$  (*'ānī*);  $\text{יְהוֹנָדָב}$  (*'ēhyôn*) 31:9, 20;  $\text{פְּאִיֵּה}$  (*pā'āh*) 31:8,9, 26.
- 2) Stylistic features – chiasm A:B :: B:A pattern.
- 3) Structural analogies – two symmetrically balanced verse units.

The “coincidences” in these depictions reflect redactional intentionality in issuing an appropriate closure to the book of Proverbs. As such the portraiture of the woman is presented with “her husband” in mind (31:11, 23, 28) in celebrating the complimentary nobility of the man in 31:1-9 and the envisaged woman in 31:10-31. Also the reading of Chapter 31 as a single composition enjoys some scholarly support (see Lane 2000:395; Waltke 2005:502). Our contribution would be to take this perspective a step further by cataloguing the interpretational implications.

Firstly the re-reading<sup>18</sup> of Proverbs 31 from a motherly perspective provides fertile ground for motherly influence in a son’s life. Elsewhere in the book, the mother’s voice is mostly couple with the father’s as a formidable partnership in raising the son (1:8; 6:20; 10:1 et al.). In this composition, the mother’s voice is heard independently as she expresses concerns from a motherly perspective. The motherly voice affirms the psychological notion “like mother like son” which argues “that the mother-son relationship and connection determines to a great extent not only what sons think about themselves but also what they think about women in general” (Sasman 2012:8). This is particularly significant for our reading of Proverbs 31 as several studies explore the reciprocity of the mother-son relationship in providing a life compass.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Hurowitz’s study deserves special mention as he supplements Lichtenstein’s study with additional uniting features, namely chastically arranged chains of themes and words.

<sup>18</sup> Chitando (2004) offers re-reading as bringing in more non-traditional sources to aid in the interpretation, which he does in his study.

<sup>19</sup> See Schwartzman (2006:226-32); Moilanen et al. (2010:1357-1367); Bush (2004:381-391); Lindsey et al. (2002:466-477); Morman & Whitely (2012:22-39); and Benn (1986:1224-1231).

We already know of the queen mother's influence of in royal matters which allowed her to play a pivotal role in State affairs and undoubtedly in her son's personal affairs. On this basis, Lichtenstein (1982:210) concludes:

While parallels may indeed be addressed for the structural patterns of both 'the words of Lemuel' and the 'Excellent Wife' the most intriguing correspondence remains that between the two poems themselves. As initially observed, the two poems which are now joined together to form the final chapter of the book of Proverbs share certain key words, themes and subjects which may have prompted some 'editorial decisions' to juxtapose the two originally independent pieces ... The juxtaposition of the two poems of Proverbs 31, as it now stands in the Hebrew text, and however it may have come about, has effected a most happy and fitting union. Indeed, Lemuel's mother had been provided with a most appropriate daughter-in-law, in more ways than one.

In agreement, with Lichtenstein here, it makes sense to see the two pieces as one but particularly set here as a single composition by the mother in 31:1. After all, no one would be more interested and better qualified to talk about a wife for a son than the mother. Lemuel's mother here seems strategically placed as the last voice that embodies the woman of substance now articulating the A-Z of such a profile for her own son's benefit.

Secondly, to question the view that the qualities are presented from a male perspective, the book of Proverbs presents both parents as taking part in the instructional venture of their son (1:8; 3:12; 4:1, 3; 6:20; 10:1; 13:1; 15:5, 20; 17:21, 25; 19:13, 26; 20:20; 23:22; 27:10; 28:7, 24; 29:3; 30:17) and on this occasion the feminine voice is heard independently (31:1). Goittein and Carasik (1988:12) point out that Deuteronomy 21:18-21 both the father and mother's roles in dealing with a defiant son is noted, which was proof that the public recognised the woman's responsibility for raising children on a level equal with the man's. They add that "we learn about the relationship between a grown up child and his mother, for example from the stories about Jacob and Rebecca or Micah and the graven image (Judges 17:1-6)".

As such there are references within the Old Testament to the "wise" women (2 Sm 20:14-22; Pr 8:1-5; 9:1-5). Goittein and Carasik (1988:11) in reading Proverbs 19:14

suggest that the Israelite society highly esteemed wisdom in a woman above all others, as they comment:

The ancient Israelite was a man of the soil, living in a mixed economy, which included cottage industry as well. On this account, as the praise of woman in Proverbs 31:10-31, (the ‘Woman of Valour’) proves, he valued most the wise diligent woman who knew how to run his farm and to oversee his many activities when he himself was preoccupied with work in the fields or civic affairs. But he was intelligent enough to know that his role required not only economic knowledge and initiative, but understanding and the ability to get along with people ... [Proverbs 31:26].

In this composition, the stereotypical portraiture of women is challenged through the ideal of what a finished product ought to look like. The idea was to awaken in the husband aspirations towards such a wife, and, in the wife, working towards the realisation of ideals.<sup>20</sup>

Thirdly, when it comes particularly to a royal member, the king’s mother had a special position of honour. Rarely is the king’s wife mentioned with special significance as his mother is. To underscore the significance of the queen mother, we read of Solomon who bowed down before his mother and even had a throne set up for her on his right hand, a position of power (1 Kings 2:19 cf. 1 Chr 6:39; Ps 45:9; 110:1; Mt 26:64; Hebrews 1:3; Rv 5:1). Solomon’s successors are mentioned in light of the Davidic standards but also in view of their mothers (see 1 Kings 15:1, 9; 22:42; 2 Kings 8:26; 11:1-3; 12:1; 14:2; 15:1-2, 32-34; 18:1-3; 21:1-3; 22:1-2; 23:31; 24:8-9). The queen mother in Proverbs 31:1-9 echoes normal Old Testament standards. For example, the queen mother’s name is mostly mentioned when her son “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord”, though there are a few exceptions. It suggests that the qualities of the king to some measure were dependent on the instructions he received from his mother. Apple (2011:176) alleges that “a queen mother might well chastise a king, since it was not unusual for a ruler’s mother to play an important role in the

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<sup>20</sup> Yoder’s study on the woman of substance from a socio-economic perspective concludes that although this portrait is based on real women, it may be a derivation from the attributes and activities of many (2003:427-47). He questions whether such ideals would be consistent with conditions during the Persian period.

kingdom especially when a king had several wives". Thus, good motherly advice was synonymous with royal success making the mother-son relationship inseparable at the highest office. We can surmise the fact that Jeconiah was exiled along with his mother in 2 Kings 24:15 perhaps of the inseparability between the two as would be true in most other cases.

Fourthly, Wendland (2006:1251) raises perhaps the most important question for this study – “where does the queen mother’s address to her son end?” He responds,

Many commentators find the terminus in v.9, with a completely new and separate discourse beginning at the acrostic poem of v.10. But there is no other formal indication of such a break in the Hebrew text, which reads as if the royal lady-cum-sage simply carries on, now with a much more highly embellished as well as a contrastive close to her motherly instructions (i.e., from *watch out for* – v.3 to *watch for* – v.10).

As a stand-alone composition, the acrostic would simply be out of place especially without a title. Wendland (2006:1252) even suggests that 31:1-9 would equally be ludicrously brief without the latter, as we have already opined. He further posits that “there is also an explicit interlocking device that ties the two texts, vv.1-9 and 10-31, together – namely, the very act of speaking” (2006:1252). In this case it is even more significant that it is the mother speaking offering parental advice to a son on how to “find”<sup>21</sup> such a virtuous wife. In so speaking, she presumes corresponding qualities on his part hence the juxtaposition of the two poems. Interestingly, Koptak (2003:672) has this to say about Proverbs 31 that “here a king receives instruction from his mother about choosing a life partner and the dangers of undisciplined sex and drinking. A positive picture follows, presented as a woman of noble character who manages a household and earns praise.”

Fifthly, is the question pertaining to the identity of “king Lemuel” in 31:1. Mostly, the name is regarded as non-Israelite (Kitchen 2006:710). The assumption is also taken that “Massa” is a place hence the immediate association with a place in north Arabian kingdom (Apple 2011:177 cf. Gn 10:30; 25:14; 1 Chr 1:30). However, a closer look at the language reveals two things. Firstly, the name is stated as *‘ha – massa’* (“the massa”) which seems to suggest not a place but an oracle or burden (cf.

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<sup>21</sup> The Hebrew concept מָשָׂא (*māšā’*) has the idea of discovering something not easily attainable.

Is 13:1; Hb 1:1; 2 Kings 9:28). Apple comments:

Understanding ‘Massa’ as ‘message’ works better within the context of Pro 30:1. Also unusual is the form used to name the king ‘*Lemu’el meleka*’ Lemuel king, rather than the standard Hebrew usage of *Ha – meleka Lemu’el* or *Lemu’el ha-melekh*. The solution seems to be to view *massa* as a play on words, as ‘message and a place name.

Secondly, the name Lemu’el in its etymology can be divided into two *lemu-* (to/for him) and *-el* (God) to imply a theophoric name. Apple (2011:177) wonders if this rendering would not be directly attributed to Solomon whose many wives had led him astray (1 Kings 11 cf. Pr 31:3).<sup>22</sup> After all Solomon’s “blessing” name given by God through the prophet Nathan was Jedidiah which means “loved by God” (2 Sm 12:24-25).<sup>23</sup> Could this be a direct *massa* (burden) to Solomon by his mother Bathsheba which would be in line with rabbinic tradition?<sup>24</sup> Maller (2011:91) reveals that “when Solomon became king at the age of twelve, it was his mother’s influence with King David, and not Solomon’s personal abilities or virtues that made Solomon the new ruler (1 Kings 1:11-35)”. We also know from the sequence of events recorded in 1 Kings that his marriage to the Egyptian wife (1Kings 3:1) precedes his being granted great wisdom (1 Kings 3:10-15 cf. 4:29-34). Clearly, Solomon did not heed his own wise advice and perhaps when early signs of his demise were evident, his mother had to speak. Where does all of this leave us?

<sup>22</sup> Maller (2011:93) writes “In Proverbs we find a description of a good wife, *A valiant wife is the crown of her husband* (Prov. 12:4), and the lament: *Who can find a valiant wife? Her value is far beyond jewels* (Prov. 31:10). Solomon also declares that *He who finds a wife finds goodness* (Prov. 18:22), yet finding this wife is no easy task: *One after another I numbered and I did not find what my soul sought. One man among a thousand I found, but I did not find one woman among them* (Eccl. 7:27-28). Perhaps these statements are to be understood as Solomon’s admission that his policy of marrying hundreds of women was a grave error.”

<sup>23</sup> So where did the name Solomon come from? According to 2 Samuel 12:24 both David and Bathsheba named him Solomon. From the Hebrew it is obvious to see that the name *שלמה* (*Shelomoh*) is a derivation of the Hebrew concept *שלום* (*shalom*) “peace”. In the passage, the naming of Solomon is immediately followed by the sending of Nathan the prophet by the Lord to name the child Jedidiah which perhaps marks his being chosen as the successor to the throne with the forerunning statement “the Lord loved him” (2 Sm 12:24).

<sup>24</sup> Apple (2011:175) cites Ibn Ezra who follows rabbinic tradition in identifying Solomon with King Lemuel, mentioned in the first verse of Chapter 31.

## IMPLICATIONS

Having raised the key hermeneutical points, it would be helpful to point out the implications of these findings for the study of the book of Proverbs.

### **The role of the mother in her own right as an instructor which departs from the Egyptian wisdom writings where this is not a feature**

This simply means while there are obvious points of contact between the book of Proverbs and ancient Egyptian wisdom writings from which biblical collectors may have borrowed, the mother's voice is one feature unique to the book of Proverbs. Goff (2010:318-9) correctly identifies that one of the "important locus of instruction is the family (e.g., Pr 1:8). Another is the royal court. This is clear in the centrality of Solomon as the putative author of the book of Proverbs and in the numerous Egyptian instructions addressed to the son of a king." Interestingly, both loci are present in Proverbs 31 intermingled into one. This suggests that the view derived from Egyptian manual that the wisdom teacher/instructor's reference to his student as "son" in a manner of speaking cannot be relied upon.<sup>25</sup> In the book of Proverbs biological ties are closely intimated to the extent that the term of endearment, "my son" is pregnant with parental concern and vocalisation (see 31:2 cf. 4:1-4).<sup>26</sup> The quality of the offspring is equally important and so is the discovery and attainment of wisdom.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Crenshaw (1988:10-11) in which he reveals, "Although Egyptian Instructions do not attribute teaching to mothers, these texts acknowledge their direct contribution to learning in other ways such as personally accompanying children to the place of instruction and preparing food for them to eat during their stay there. This distancing of mothers from the actual learning process reaches its extreme form in Ankhsheshonq's observation that 'Instructing a woman is like having a sack of sand whose side is split open'." Such a low opinion of women hardly left room for an astute mother to impart wise counsel. Nevertheless, this same author conceded that "A good woman of noble character is food that comes in time of hunger. So the author did not subscribe to the view that all women were incapable of learning. Furthermore, Papyrus Insinger's perceptive insight that 'No instruction can succeed if there is dislike' opens the door for parental teaching, since affection for one's mother predisposed children to receive counsel from her."

<sup>26</sup> See Goitein (1988:12) in which he reveals the prominent role of both parents in the instruction of their son, as well as public discipline when the son had failed to heed parental advice.

<sup>27</sup> Fox (2007:75) reveals that "the feature that distinguishes the book of Proverbs from non-Israelite Wisdom is its concern for wisdom as such. Egyptians Instructions speak about wisdom from time to time, but usually with reference to the ancient teachings. Mesopotamian Wisdom rarely mentions it. The book of Ahiqar, Syrian in its origin, gives more attention but does not make wisdom its focus." This simply demonstrates the

### **Shedding of new insights into the mother-son relationship perhaps not underscored in previous studies**

The son portrayed in the book of Proverbs is a product of parental instruction (Pr 1:8 and 6:20) where both father and mother are featured as a couple. The father's corrective teaching (*mûsâr*), and his commands (*mišwāh*) are paralleled to the mother's teaching (*torāh*), suggesting the active participation of both parents. Seeing that Proverbs 1:8 as 10:1 both commence new sections and father and mother are mentioned as equal partners in the moral upbringing of the son, it stands to reason then, that in places where the mother is not explicitly mentioned her absence does not necessarily mean exclusion. On the contrary, not only is the significance of her influence implied via the description of her teaching as *torah*, there is some light thrown into her role as an instructor at the same footing as her husband. Crenshaw (1988:9) is right in stating that "the ideal wife and mother in Proverbs 31:10-31 alludes to this teaching role, although without stating who actually benefitted from her instruction". He adds (1988:10):

The observation in 31:26 reads: 'She opens her mouth with wisdom, and loyal teaching is on her tongue.' That is, she speaks compassionately and wisely. The adjective *hesed* connotes steadfastness, an integrity generated by a deep sense of mutual responsibility. All three texts referring to maternal instruction prefer a single expression, *torah*, and even this word is further qualified in 31:26 to focus on a mother's love. There is no hint of harsh discipline, which arguably hovers over the expressions associated with a father's instruction.

Therefore, it can be argued then that the role that the queen mother plays in 31:1-9 of instructing her son is simply emblematic of ancient mothers' concern for moral purity of their children. In these references we are given insights into parenting but specifically instruction as a shared role to suggest that women were themselves beneficiaries of wisdom instruction to enable them to pass on the acquired wisdom.

### **The woman motif in the book of Proverbs aids the plausibility of women contributors to the account**

As already mentioned, feminist ideological objections to Proverbs 31 and in particular

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distinctive nature of the concerns the book of Proverbs raises particularly in child-raising.

31:10-31 as masculine projections would simply not hold water if the portraiture is composed by a woman. Although it may even be said that the portraiture is laden with male codes, a closer reading of the portraiture actually challenges the status quo at the time of writing as well as our own. In his socio-economic reading of Proverbs 31:10-31, Yoder (2003:428-29)<sup>28</sup> understandably struggles to harmonise the ideals promulgated in the account and those perceived in real life situations at that time. In other words the question the acrostic lines raise is where in the world would one ever see a woman with such all-round accomplishments? If the speaker in 31:1-9 is the same as 31:10-31 the queen mother herself could have clearly played that role. Primarily, the passage is not a prescription of what women should be but simply a description intended to aid the son who apparently seems to be losing it morally with loose women. Rather, the description offers a better and respectable alternative.

### **The portraiture of the virtuous wife presents a product of wisdom instruction which suggests parallel wisdom instruction for women**

Wisdom has been recognised mostly as a result of instruction. When the Bible makes reference to wise women one has to anticipate forums where such women were produced and therefore were broadly recognised for their accomplishment. References such as 2 Samuel 14:1-3; 20:14-22; present wise women playing a public and advisory role of national significance. Goitein (1988:10) is right in deducing that “the wisdom of the wise woman is more than a natural talent. It is the complete ensemble of traits and training by means of which a woman acquires leadership among women, and sometimes among the public in general.” Fox (2007a:670) states that wisdom is not derived from experience as experience does not translate into wisdom. He argues for a

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<sup>28</sup> Yoder (2003:446) maintains that the Persian period is the most likely time for the conditions of women described in Proverbs 31:10-31 to have existed. He identifies them as wealthy or of high position. He writes that “consideration of Prov. 31:10-31 in light of the socio-economic evidence presented here suggests that the portrait of the Woman of Substance may well reflect real women in the Persian period. She is a bride valued highly for her wealth and socio-economic potential. Her dowry and earnings are ‘loot’ that her husband may use for his own gain. She maintains and trades in textiles. She buys and sells in the marketplace and brings food from ‘afar’ to her household. She manages workers. She acquires real estate and develops it for income. In short, her socio-economic activities mirror those of Persian period women, particularly those of affluence and position. The sage thus taught about her in a manner typical of the wisdom tradition by pointing to the world, indeed to the women of his context.” Clearly, Yoder assumes the speaker to be male and the recipients to be male.

principle of coherence where a statement of truth has to cohere with some specified set of propositions as in human observations to divine standards. Wise women were exposed to such principles where wisdom was the envisioning capacity of human everyday experiences through divine lenses in order to provide enlightened guidelines endorsed by all. This implies an instructional forum.

### **Adding to the possibility of women as creators of biblical literature whose voice in this case are utilised to bring the book of Proverbs to its climax and closure**

On the onset we can distinguish between writing and creating. We do not have evidence of women as writers but certainly as composers or speakers. The collection of wisdom material was mostly by royal prerogative purely from a resource point of view. However, the origins of these collections are diverse. Coming back to the role of women here, we wonder along with Goitein (1988:11) who asks:

Who knows whether the image of Wisdom in the form of a woman who stands 'at the topmost heights, by the wayside, at the crossroads, near the gates at the city entrance, at the entryways (Prov. 8:2-3), or who prepares the feast, pours out the wine, set the table and sends her girls throughout the city to invite anyone who so desires to enjoy her hospitality (Prov. 9:2-5) – who knows whether this allegorical description did not originate with the actual wise women who we have found in the earlier history of Israel in such varied circumstances?

It seems plausible for biblical writers to allegorise based on actuals anyways. Moore (1993:158) seems to see a distinction between the personified and the real when he writes:

There seems to be no real crisis at the root of Proverbs 1-9, no thorny conflict, no bloody dispute at the center of this text. Wise women in the real world are professional mediators hired to resolve messy conflicts. Theirs is the world of human ambition and human pride. The Wisdom Woman, on the other hand, is animated by an imaginary world where dispute is marginal and conflict irresolvable. Hers is a world of scribes and sages, not warriors. In her world, 'wisdom' seems less a real person than a timeless ideal.

Camp (1981:14) however, finds wise women to be “representatives of at least one significant, political role available to women in the years preceding the establishment of the kingship in Israel, a role that continued to exist into the monarchic era, but of which we have no evidence after the time of David”. In particularizing the wise woman she concludes that “the narrator so explicitly relates, it is “in her wisdom” that she advises “all the people” of the town. Sagacity, faithfulness, a commanding presence, and readily acknowledged influence with her peers—these are the attributes that clearly mark this woman” (1981:26). These narratives do not reveal how these women attained such national status but simply depict their success. In similar vein, the book of Proverbs celebrates wisdom instruction through the portrait of a suitable wife having reminded us throughout the book that “wisdom” who has been calling out to the son all along is herself a woman. The two merge and are no longer imaginary or unrealistic but plausible.

## CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, the reading of Proverbs 31:1-31 as a single unit as well as final parental and specifically motherly instruction resolves a number of exegetical concerns. First, this discussion allows us to wrestle with the text and not paratext in viewing it. Secondly, the discussion forces us to assess the significance of a single unit approach to the closure of the book of Proverbs towards the overall reading of the entire composition perhaps in drawing us closer to the organising principle. Thirdly, the discussion opens new insights specifically on wise women that we may not have considered as valid for interpretational purposes. Lastly, the significance of the woman motif within the book of Proverbs as a closure to the entire account is a blessing in disguise in more ways than one. In his/her wisdom, the final redactor intimates that an instructed son deserves a partner who is a product of similar wise input as a spouse, for in doing so, the couple would not be unequally yoked in skilfully negotiating lives well lived.

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