

Proverbs 31:10–31: A contextual reading

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A contextual reading of Proverbs 31:10–31 indicates that the periscope was and is still being used to judge women and their conduct, not only personally but also professionally. The placing of Proverbs within the wisdom genre, as well as considering the possible author(s) of the Book of Proverbs, gives readers a better understanding of the community, culture and society in which it originated. Proverbs invites the reader to converse in what is truly meaningful in life. The purpose of the article is to render Proverbs 31:10–31 more accessible to its readers and to involve the reader within the context in which the periscope came to life. The woman in Proverbs 31:10–31 does not truly exist. The Wisdom Literature reflects her as an ideal paradigmatic figure. Women should be inspired by her qualities and values, as well as be encouraged to emulate these desirable attributes. The woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 should be viewed as a role model that other women can look up to. Women, especially in South Africa, represent diverse groups that include different races, class and cultures. This should not prevent women from working together to transform the lives of all women. Working together as a 'sisterhood' can assist women in reaching shared goals, instead of working against each other or against men. She is a personification of the woman, wisdom theology, encouraging what women should strive for. This woman portrays the way in which women should live while they are pursuing a relationship with God.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article brings theological discourse into discussion with gender studies, hermeneutic studies, dogmatic and ethical studies as well as practical theology. It also explores the relationship between the 'noble woman' of Proverbs 31:10–31 and the women of today. It impacts the Old Testament's theological concepts of women, especially the 'noble woman' as praised in Proverbs 31:10–31.

Keywords: Proverbs 31:10–31; feminism; liberation; noble; woman.

Introduction

Renowned women, such as Mother Teresa¹ and Corrie Ten Boom,² have received worldwide acclaim for their philanthropic work and benevolent lives. Through their inspirational work, they actively demonstrated Christian values.

Mother Teresa (1910–1997) was a nun who received the 'call within a call', which gave rise to the Missionaries of Charity family of Sisters, Brothers, Fathers and Co-Workers. Her aim and mission was 'to quench the infinite thirst of Jesus on the cross for love and souls' by 'labouring at the salvation and sanctification of the poorest of the poor'. Mother Teresa travelled tirelessly to countries such as South Africa, Albania, Cuba and Iraq to bring services to poor and disaster-stricken countries (Mother Teresa of Calcutta n.d.).

Corrie Ten Boom (1892–1983) and her family protected hundreds of Jews during World War II from arrest by Nazi authorities. Ms Ten Boom and her family were imprisoned by the Nazi's, but she survived and started a worldwide ministry. She also started a rehabilitation centre for concentration camp survivors (Corrie ten Boom 2014). Both these women remind the reader of the characteristics of the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31, who showed courage, bravery and wisdom. These women cared for those who were less fortunate and oppressed in their respective communities. It is women like them, and countless others, who have made a difference in their communities, who are

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1. Mother Teresa (26 August 1910 to 05 September 1997), known in the Roman Catholic Church as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, was an Albanian-Indian Catholic nun and missionary. She was born in Skopje, then part of Kosovo Vilayet of the Ottoman Empire. In 1928, Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu joined the sisters of Our Lady of Loreto, a Catholic order that humbly ministered to lepers, the homeless and the poorest of the poor in the slums of Kolkata, India (Mother Teresa of Calcutta n.d.).

2. Cornelia Arnolda Johanna 'Corrie' Ten Boom (15 April 1892 to 15 April 1983) was a Dutch watchmaker and Christian who, along with her father and other family members, helped many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust during World War II by hiding them in her closet. She was imprisoned for her actions (Corrie Ten Boom 2014).

honoured on days celebrating womanhood, such as Women's Day³ and Mother's Day,⁴ by praising women as virtuous and capable, whose value surpasses that of precious stones (New Living Translation [NLT]).

Christian women today sometimes find themselves in conversations where some women are praised as depicting the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31. If these women then compare themselves with the qualities of the woman depicted in Proverbs 31:10–31, they might feel that they cannot meet such high standards (Joubert & Smith 2010:17).

Every year, South Africans participate in the '16 Days of Activism against Abuse' campaign,⁵ which focusses on the abuse against women. The year 2019 marked South Africa's 20th year of participation (What is 16 Days of Activism 2019?). Even though special days like the 16 Days of Activism against Abuse, Women's Day and Mother's Day have been instituted, it is important to remember that society is still in a process of transition in acknowledging and honouring women in all spheres of society.

A woman who is struggling to survive, exploited and abused – who does not have access to the necessary resources – will not be able to grow and develop into the woman she would want to be or who she was created to be. In the absence of the process of transition in society at large towards greater gender parity (equality), women should have the opportunity to not only have meaningful relationships and to grow intellectually and emotionally but also to play and relax. Claassens (2015:45) stated that Proverbs 31:10–31 does not only want to encourage women to be a woman in her own right and to make sensible decisions but also to give other women room, opportunity and support to be able to do the same.

The bravery of the 20 000 women who marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, South Africa, in 1956 (SAHO 2012) showed the courage, bravery and wisdom that Claassens (2015:45) refers to. Not only did they stand up for themselves

3. International Women's Day is celebrated globally each year on 08 March since its inception in 1911. The day still continues to grow from strength to strength, reflecting the ever-changing societal roles of women and their economic, cultural and political achievements. It advocates the rights of women and calls for action to accelerate the process of gender parity (International Women's Day n.d.). On 09 August of each year, South Africa observes National Women's Day commemorating the bravery of 20 000 women who marched to the Union Buildings in 1956 to protest against legislation aimed at tightening the government's control over the movement of black women in urban areas (SAHO 2012).

4. In the United States, the concept of Mother's Day was proposed by Julia Ward Howe and founded by Anna Jarvis. Howe was an activist, writer and poet. Jarvis was known as the Mother of Mothers, an apt title for a woman who worked hard to bestow the honour of all mothers. Americans now celebrate Mother's Day in May. South Africans also celebrate Mother's Day annually in May. Mother's Day dates back to the era of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The Greeks used the celebrations to honour Rhea, the wife of Cronus. She is also seen as the mother of many of the deities in Greek mythology (Hard 2004:69). The Ancient Romans celebrated a spring festival called 'Hilaria' dedicated to Cybele, who was a mother goddess (Mother's Day n.d.). It is a day on which we celebrate the mothers of our society and the undeniable role they play in each of our lives, sometimes in very difficult circumstances, such as being single working mothers (Mother's Day n.d.).

5. The 16 Days of Activism for No Violence against Women and Children is a global initiative that runs from 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women) through to International Human Rights Day on 10 December. Although the campaign only runs for 16 days, the objectives are reinforced by a year-long programme and a national plan to combat abuse. The government, business-, civil society- and faith-based organisations and the media are all participating in the campaign to increase awareness of the negative impact of violence and abuse on women and children (What is 16 Days of Activism? 2019).

as women in their own right but they also stood up and stood together, to give other women room, opportunity and support to be able to do the same for themselves.

A meeting of two worlds: The woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 and the modern woman

The aim of this article was to identify the attributes of the woman as she is portrayed in Proverbs 31:10–31 and how it applies to modern women. The question is whether or not it is possible for modern women to identify with the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31.

The 'noble woman' of Proverbs 31:10–31 is a personification of wisdom and is the ideal woman. The reader's interpretation of this woman influences the contextual reading of the pericope. The article reveals that the 'noble woman' is a personification of wisdom and an example of how modern women can accomplish various tasks by approaching them with wisdom. A 'woman of wisdom' should be grounded in her service to the Lord. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding' (Pr 9:10, New International Version [NIV]).

The image of the ideal woman as portrayed by Proverbs is not the image of only one woman but a compiled image of the ideal woman. The woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 is an ideal woman. The woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 does not exist but is an example of the woman modern women can strive to become. The woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 is a positive role model that modern women can look up to.

The article looks at the difference, if any at all, between the experiential worlds of the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 and the experiential world of modern women with specific reference to feminism. The values and qualities that the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 possess are worth striving for. The values and qualities do not only uplift the 'noble woman', her family and household but also her community. Women such as Corrie Ten Boom, Mother Teresa, Christina Landman, Juliana Claassens, Thuli Madonsela and Yolanda Dreyer have influenced not only their immediate societies but also the world.

Feminism through the years has highlighted the challenges modern women face in their experiential world. These challenges brought on by a still very patriarchy-oriented society place a strain on women in society today. The role of modern woman differs from the role of the woman in Proverbs 31:10–31. A differentiation between the life challenges of the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 and modern women is made. The reader's interpretation of who this woman is influences the contextual reading of the pericope.

In transition: The experiential world of the modern woman

Decades have passed since the historical women's march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, South Africa, in 1956

(SAHO 2012). More than a century after the inception of International Women's Day on 08 March 1911 (International Women's Day n.d.), Women's rights should have been a non-issue in society at large and in the faith community by 2019. This is, however, not the case. Society and women today are in a continuous process of transition, and this has a definite influence on how women, still to this day, view themselves and their roles in society and as Christian women.

Women today are inundated with responsibilities entrusted upon them by society and even their faith community. They must feed their family, work to pay the bills and stay true to the demands placed on them at work, at home, within their faith community and in relationships. Women, especially God-fearing women who depend on God's help in their daily activities, may become tired of the depiction of the perfect woman in Proverbs 31:10–31.

A significant shift has, however, taken place in both women's and society's thoughts about women's emancipation and equality. We observe more women in the boardroom, more women experiencing greater equality in legislative rights, and there has been an increased critical mass of women's visibility as impressive role models emerge in every aspect of life (International Women's Day n.d.). It is, however, an unfortunate fact that women, not only in terms of gender but also based on race, are still not paid equally compared with their male counterparts. Women are still disproportionately represented in business and politics. Globally, the education of women, their access to healthcare and violence against them is worse than that of men (International Women's Day n.d.).

The process of transition of women is also evident in the Christian faith community. Many Christian women, across the ages, have struggled with their identity and role as women of God. To complicate matters further, the Church and society played a significant role in imposing certain cultural and context-related views on these women. Chitando (2004:151) opined that the Hebrew Scriptures of Christianity were used selectively in order to justify the marginalisation of women.

Women in society, today, face numerous challenges – they have to survive in a world that is often hostile towards their ideas for change.

Their world is still dominated by patriarchal systems, and family life has been disrupted by violence and abuse. According to Budlender and Lund (2011:925), the result of the disruption of family life is that women need to fulfil the role of both breadwinner and carer in a context of high unemployment rates and limited economic opportunities. Gender-based violence and abuse also pose a challenge to women as violence in society is often a symptom of deep-rooted social problems. Violence devalues human dignity and the self-worth of the victim (What is 16 Days of Activism? 2019).

South Africa still faces high levels of abuse against women in spite of its world-renowned Constitution and legislative overhaul to safeguard the rights of women.

The time has come for the Christian faith community to take a stronger stand against the abuse of women. The Christian faith community cannot, as it has in the past, remain passive and detached from the abuse and violence against women. In keeping silent, the Christian faith community can be criticised for upholding centuries-old marginalisation of women (Chitando 2004:151).

In lieu of the above, Claassens (2015:45) opined that for the Christian faith community, Proverbs 31:10–31 encourages the society to support and make room for women so that they will have the opportunity to flourish. Claassens (2016:5–6) stated that the concept of human flourishing is important in order to critically evaluate the quality of women's lives in different communities around the world. Women all over the world are struggling to survive.

Statistics compiled by the United Nations (discussion on 'Women and Poverty' during the Fourth World Conference on Women held in September, 1995, in Beijing, China, which was convened by the United Nations) on the feminisation of poverty indicates that women are faced with barriers in terms of basic healthcare, nutrition and education. Besides the women from poor communities who are struggling to survive, working women are also struggling to balance the demands of a career and family. One can also add to this the all-too-real threat and, in many cases, the reality of emotional, physical and psychological violence that acts as a unifying factor for the rich and the poor, white and black women in their homes and at work. As a society, we have failed to create conditions for women to live lives that are truly worth living (Claassens 2016:5–7).

Claassens (2016:6) made use of Nussbaum's (1999:40) insight into human flourishing to indicate that we should not be content with 'mere bare humanness'. Nussbaum (1999):

We want to specify a life in which fully human functioning, or a kind of basic human flourishing will be available. For we do not want politics to take mere survival as its goal; we want to describe a life in which the dignity of the human being is not violated by hunger or fear or the absence of opportunity. (p. 40)

Claassens (2016:6) utilised Nussbaum's understanding of the concept of human flourishing as a hermeneutical framework to interpret the depiction of the 'noble woman' in Proverbs 31:10–31.

The reader, especially female readers, must not pursue this woman in fine detail, but rather as an inspiration for every woman to completely develop her individual and God-given potential. Every woman must thus develop in her own right and live according to God's will. No woman can be exactly as the woman in Proverbs 31:10–31, but can learn from her diligence, integrity and ingenuity (Burden 1993:937–938).

Proverbs 31:10–31: Moving towards the liberation of the ‘noble woman’

A contextual reading of Proverbs 31:10–31 is of importance to gain an understanding of the application of the pericope to modern society. The poetic depiction of the ‘virtuous and capable wife’ (NLT) at the end of Proverbs represents one of the most striking documentations of women dating from the Ancient Hebrew times (Lang 2004:188). Proverbs 31:10–31 emphasises the important role of a woman within a family, being her priority and calling (Joubert & Smith 2010:17). The idea of the ‘noble woman’ still causes historical and theological controversy (Yoder 2001:2) as the relationship between Proverbs and the Wisdom Literature in the Ancient Near East is still contentious and the date and origin of the book are debateable.

The writer is in agreement with the view of Groenewald (2005:552), which combined a synchronic (‘same time’) textual reading and diachronic (meaning ‘across time’) textual reading of Proverbs 31:10–31. The synchronic approach is of importance to the contextual reading of Proverbs 31:10–31 in that the pericope is not read in isolation but also in relation to the world in which it first existed as a text (Gorman 2001:12). Furthermore, the origin and development of the pericope was considered during the exegesis of the text. The result was that the historical and literary aspects supported one another and helped in identifying the different dimensions of the text (Human 1999:358).

Exegesis reflects the text as a living entity that exists in relation to life. Previous understandings and interpretations of the text will differ from the personal understandings and interpretations of the text for modern Bible readers. Current experiences essentially determine the writer’s as well as the reader’s understanding of the text (Steck 1995:3–4).

In recent years, the importance of Proverbs 31:10–31 has increasingly been a subject of interest within Old Testament studies, because of the changing position of women in modern society. These studies have helped to show that the pericope of Proverbs 31:10–31 should not be viewed in isolation. Instead, it should be viewed within the greater context of the Book of Proverbs and the relationship between Proverbs and the Wisdom Literature of Ancient Israel and the Wisdom Literature of the Ancient Near East.

The portrayal of wisdom as a woman is not seen as abstract but rather as concrete. Wisdom is described as an outstanding woman who knows exactly what is expected of her, especially when it comes to her household (Venter 1999:732). Proverbs 31:13, 15 and 17 describe a woman who does her work diligently (i.e. her assignments in the home).

Claassens (2016:xiii) endeavoured to give a voice to women throughout history who struggled to be recognised as equal to their male counterparts. Throughout the darkest periods in history, such as the ghettos in extermination camps in

Nazi Germany, the plantations of America in the South, the violent civil rights era and the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa, women stood up in a quest to be treated equally to men.

For the purpose of this article, the context of two South African women was taken into consideration on how the text is interpreted if it is read from the experiential world of a Northern Sotho (Bosadi) woman’s perspective, as well as from the writer’s own context. Masenya’s view is a feministic liberal perspective, which is linked to an ‘African-ness’ of a Northern Sotho South African woman.

The ‘woman of wisdom’ in the poem is the manager of her household. She is competently and virtuously managing all aspects of an intricate household and directing all the members of the household in their numerous responsibilities. The woman does physical labour, which involves the different household tasks, specifically that of textile production. She is responsible for the household’s purchase of property and takes part in the market economy of the day. Through all these duties, she provides moral governance to the members of her realm (Meyers 1991:48). Camp (1985:92) noted that ‘the woman is not simply the maintainer of a household but the source of its identity’. Although the household is identified and defined as the woman’s, it does not mean that the house (property) no longer belongs to her husband or father. Her position and behaviour does, however, indicate the power she has over all the household activities (Masenya 1996:128).

The writer is of the opinion that the household can be seen as a metaphor for all spheres of life in which women can hold power, not only to liberate themselves but also to liberate their community and country. In South Africa, women, regardless of their race, class or culture, encapsulate the identity of their households. The household can be a metaphor for women’s movements of power, such as Women’s Day, celebrated in South Africa or the #MeToo movement on a global scale, to abolish all forms of (sexual) abuse against women that still exist today.

The Israelite and the African outlook is, however, a holistic one, with no dichotomy between the secular and sacred life. Israelites and Africans are convinced that there is a religious order set by God for Israel and for the ancestors of Africa to which their people must adhere to. If one fails to submit to their demands, it leads to punishment, whilst obedience to it leads to compensation (Masenya 1996:136). The consequences of the previous statement is that for an Israelite or an African, when something goes wrong in any sphere of their life, the individual has not satisfied the requirements of the order, and therefore, God and the ancestors are not happy. For example, when the Israelites do not fare well in warfare, they ascribe their failure to their covenantal relationship with Yahweh. If children in the Northern Sotho community do not progress well academically, they directly assume that the ancestors are not happy. This is how all the spheres of life are integrated as a unified whole (Masenya 1996:136–137).

In the Afrikaans-speaking Christian faith community, which the writer is a part of, Christian women (including men) also incorporate God in all spheres of their lives and do not make a distinction between the public and private spheres of life. Their power and success at home and in the public sphere lay within their reliance on God for strength and their ability to participate in both the public and private spheres. Their encouragement of each other as women of God's Word allows them to interact with one another by the grace and love of God. They do, however, acknowledge that they are human beings who can make mistakes and disappoint God.

In reviewing literature for this article, it became evident that most of the available material was written from the perspective of European Caucasian men (Crenshaw 2010; Fox 2009; Waltke & Yu 2007). This potentially limits the application of their research in the contextual reading of Proverbs 31:10–31. On the other hand, a Northern Sotho (Bosadi) woman's reading of the text was limited to the perspective of Masenya (1996). This is because of limited existing African research on Proverbs 31:10–31, together with even more limited female authorship of the subject (Ackermann 1997; Claassens 2016).

The context in which women live and strive for change is not only in their immediate communities but also society at large. Their context influences how the readers interpret Proverbs 31:10–31, and its relevance to their individual situations and struggles to bring about change. It is also positive to note that women no longer allow the pericope to be interpreted by men only, but that women are interpreting the pericope themselves, including the meaning of the pericope for themselves and within their communities.

Patriarchy, feminism and Proverbs 31:10–31

Biblical texts, such as Proverbs 31:10–31, were used by the Christian faith community to restrict women to abide by socially accepted norms and patriarchal behaviours. The patriarchal view included that women were not allowed to work outside the household. The wife was primarily responsible for childcare, was not allowed to own property and had to submit to her husband. This could lead to women questioning their self-worth in communities where male domination is still rampant (Chitando 2004:151).

Concepts that are related to patriarchy or a paternalistic view include kyriarchy, androcentrism and heterarchy. The term *kyriarchy* is of Greek origin, which means 'master' or 'lord'. *Kyrios* means 'to reign or control', and *archein* is a 'socio-political system of domination in which elite educated propertied men hold power over wo/men (*sic*) and other men' (Schüssler-Fiorenza 2001:211).

If we were to read Proverbs 31:10–31 from a kyriachal point of view, women are dominated by men in positions of power. According to this view, educated men were able to prevent

women from buying and owning land. The woman in the pericope (Pr 31:16) did, however, buy and own land.

Androcentrism means 'male centeredness' (Ackermann, Draper & Mashinini 1991:xvii). It is based on the antiquated belief that only males are truly human. Androcentrism proclaims that only males are fully human, which leads to the view that females are inferior to men and a divine mistake (Rakoczy 2004:11). If we read the pericope from an androcentric viewpoint, women would be seen as a divine mistake, inferior and regarded as possessions with the purpose of fulfilling the needs of men. The pericope would then have no meaning and will not motivate either men or women as to the divine role women can play in society.

Meyers (2014:27) argued that the concept 'heterarchy' is preferable to 'patriarchy', especially when one acknowledges the existence of hierarchies within a patriarchal society. Meyers (2014:27) recognised 'that different power structures can exist simultaneously in any given society with each structure having its own hierarchical arrangements that may cross-cut each other laterally'. In Proverbs 31:10–31, it seems that a heterarchy did exist in society. The 'noble wife' positively influenced her husband's position in the community as he was respected by the elders at the gate (Pr 31:23). This was a direct result of how his wife was seen and respected within the greater community, even though certain power structures were in place at the time in which Proverbs 31:10–31 originated. The writer proposes that although the woman in Proverbs 31:10–31 was subjected to patriarchy (heterarchy), she was still seen and respected as a virtuous woman. She was respected in her community because of her 'human-ness' (the person she was), irrespective of her class as a noble woman.

Claassens (2016:69–70) is of the opinion that women can be empowered by recognising the ideological power and force of patriarchy, sexism, androcentrism and *kyriarchy* for what it represented and how it kept women feeling inferior to men. Claassens (2016:69–70) furthermore opined that women in the Old Testament, however, were not helpless victims but regularly in a position to exercise a measure of control and action in their lives.

Gloria Steinem, a world-renowned feminist, journalist and activist, stated that (International Women's Day n.d.):

The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist nor to any one organization, but rather to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights. (p. 1)

Gloria Steinem is thus of the opinion that women's struggle is not the responsibility of only one group or movement but should be a collective effort to preserve all human rights.

Society and the Christian faith community can no longer ignore a new generation of women that has come to the fore. Texts such as Proverbs 31:10–31 cannot be adequately studied without listening to the voice of the gender that informs

Proverbs 31:10–31. A generation of Christian women created a novel understanding of their newly found self-worth, namely, 'feminist theology'. This concept means that women no longer use only theological traditions developed by men without questioning such traditions (Bowden 2001:94). Women's belief no longer reflects the inherited experiences of men but is a discovery of the reality of their own experiences so that they can become the subject of their own theology.

Together with the changing positions of women in modern society, a new generation of women emerged. Women such as Masenya (1996) and Oduyoye (2001) demanded to be seen as Christian women with dignity and social standing, as equal and not inferior to men (Bowden 2001:94). Feminist theology, which originated from their awareness of their newly found self-worth, played an integral role in how these and other female authors consulted in this study, interpreted and questioned the text and male-orientated interpretations thereof (Bowden 2001:94).

Some scholars are of the opinion that the 'noble woman' in Proverbs 31:10–31 is not independent. She is seen as a provider for her husband and children (Fontaine 1992:146). Braude⁶ (1996:146) opined that the concept of the 'noble woman' was fitting for the times in which she lived, although she could not exist in society in her own right. The writer agrees with Meyers (2014:27), as mentioned previously, that the social structures of the time resembled a heterarchy in that each structure in society had its own hierarchical arrangement.

Some women, for example, Masenya, do not want to be labelled as feminists but rather womanists (Masenya 1996:146). Ruether⁷ (1996:146) added that Proverbs 31:10–31 is not liberating in nature as family life is just one aspect of the 'noble woman' of Proverbs 31:10–31, and therefore, it does not have to define her. She portrays the many facets that a woman can choose from to enrich and define her life. She is also described as a business woman; no wonder some scholars are ambivalent about the portrait of the 'noble woman' in the pericope. She is portrayed as a powerful and independent woman, but she is also defined in terms of her family, specifically her husband and children (Carmody 1988:72). Camp (1985:93) postulated that the poem can either oppress or empower women. Masenya's and the writer's reading of Proverbs 31:10–31 is an attempt to empower women, irrespective of race, class and culture.

Bowden (2001:95) continued by highlighting a few possible problem areas that require attention. Firstly, the gender parity (equality) of women needs to be a given in society today.

6. Conversation between Masenya and Braud (1995). The information gathered from the conversation between Braud and Masenya is important for this study. Braud's view on the 'noble wife' and her inability to identify with her is important, as it highlights the different views women have of the 'noble wife' and her influence on their lives, if any. Therefore, a part of the conversation from Masenya (1996:146) is cited for the purpose of this study.

7. The conversation between Masenya and Ruether (1995) is important to this study. Ruether's view, again, shows that women have different opinions as to how the 'noble woman' of Proverbs 31:10–31 is viewed. Therefore, a part of the conversation from Masenya (1996:146) is cited for the purpose of this study.

Secondly, the different religions, such as the prophetic religion, can contribute to the changing worldwide awareness in the post-modern paradigm on the basis of women's participation in religion. Thirdly, the Christian faith community should contribute to the implementation of political and social human rights as well as the dimensions of a partnership between men and women (Bowden 2001:95).

The writer concurs with Waegeman (1989:101–103) and Lyons (1987:238) that the 'noble woman' is independent and powerful and that she sets an example for other women to be empowered and live an independent life. The 'noble woman' of Proverbs 31:10–31 was not only defined by her family life as suggested by Braude (1996:146). Her life was characterised by many facets that added substance to her as a person. This pericope sketches the ideal woman with qualities other women reading the text could strive for (Hawkins 1996:21).

Modern women have the freedom to decide which facets they want to include in their lives or how they want to be defined. They do not have to conform to patriarchal or the so-called heterarchical (Meyers 2014:27) ideologies and/or only be defined by one facet (woman or mother) of their lives, such as being a wife or mother and/or being an empowered, independent woman. These facets do not have to be mutually exclusive. In much the same sense, women should not be defined by race, class or culture. Any woman, regardless of her race, class or culture, can be a caring, kind mother or wife and also a business woman. Women can be empowered by the pericope whether they identify themselves as feminists or not.

In 2019, it is evident with movements such as #MeToo⁸ that women are not permitting patriarchal or heterarchical ideologies to oppress and silence them. As Proverbs 31:10–31 portrays a woman who is powerful, independent and respected by her family and community, the researcher maintains that the 'noble woman' would have supported movements such as #MeToo. Such movements value women's worth in society just as the 'noble woman's' worth was praised by her husband and children (Pr 31:28).

Relevance of a contextual reading of Proverbs 31:10–31

The challenge of responsible theological reflection on Proverbs 31:10–31 goes hand in hand with the consideration of different understandings of the role of women in the pericope as well as in the Book of Proverbs itself. These contexts included the broader context of Wisdom Literature, the cultic and the socio-historical contexts within the Ancient Near Eastern milieu. Different readings of Proverbs 31:10–31 have caused controversy in that interpreters have different opinions as to how the pericope should be understood.

8. #MeToo is a movement to empower women who have fallen prey to the sexual abuse of men in positions of power. The movement was founded more than 10 years ago by Tarana Burke. Burke (2018) stated that the power of a foundation such as #MeToo lies in the action women now take to not allow the oppression and abuse to continue in order to empower women to speak up and speak out about all forms of abuse (#MeToo Movement 2018).

It became evident that the contemporary reader's understanding of the role of women in society differs greatly from that of ancient people's understanding. Current perspectives on the role of women are informed from different theological readings thereof, depending on the age, gender, culture and education of the present-day reader.

Patriarchy and its view on and treatment of women persisted as a theme throughout this article. Patriarchy, feminism, culture, society and religious bodies, including the Christian faith community, were all moulded with the principle of patriarchy in mind. Much of the literature consulted revealed that most of these readings of the pericope were written from a predominantly patriarchal worldview (Perdue 2000; Van Leeuwen 1997; Whybray 1995, 1991). Several feminists also argue that Proverbs 31:10–31 is to the benefit of patriarchy (Whybray 1995:143). In a male-orientated scripture, the positive and negative positions of women are primarily seen from the perspective of what they give to the men involved (Fontaine 1988:516, 1992:146).

Most feminist readings of Proverbs 31:10–31 have been conducted by white women (Masenya 1996:127). Prior to 1996, when Masenya completed her PhD on *A Bosadi (Womanhood) perspective of Proverbs 31:10–31 in a South African context*, no black or African feminist had ever published anything on Proverbs 31:10–31 (Masenya 1996:127). Masenya (1996:127) opined that nothing had been written on the poem from a women's perspective before that time because of the novelty of women in theology. Another possibility is that in Western (specifically the USA) biblical scholarship, books on the Writings (specifically the Book of Proverbs) have not enjoyed the same popularity as the other books of the Hebrew Scriptures (Masenya 1996:127–128).

It was seen through a contextual reading and application of the pericope that the attributes of the woman as portrayed in Proverbs 31:10–31 still apply to modern women. The reading of the text by Masenya (1996), from the perspective of a Northern Sotho (Bosadi) woman, as well as by the researcher (in her own context), indicated that modern women, even in different contexts, can identify with the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31. This compiled image of the ideal woman can be an inspiration for every woman to develop her own potential as a woman. It is evident that no woman matches the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 but can learn from her diligence, integrity and ingenuity (Burden 1993:937–938).

The difference between the experiential world of the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 and that of modern women was reviewed. Women living in contemporary society are confronted by challenges, such as patriarchal systems and societal demands, which hinder their ability to flourish in their experiential world. The role of the modern woman and how it differs from the role of the woman in Proverbs 31:10–31 were considered. The above-mentioned disruption of family life in contemporary society meant that women needed to fulfil the role of both breadwinner and carer in a context of high volumes of unemployment and limited economic opportunities (Budlender & Lund 2011:925).

The life challenges of the woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 and modern women were distinguished. Masenya's (1996) and the writer's reading of the text indicated that the Hebrew Scriptures of Christianity were used selectively in order to justify the marginalisation of women in Africa. Chitando (2004:151) also suggested this to be the case with women within the broader Christian faith community. It addressed the question of what happens to the text if it is read from the experienced world of a Northern Sotho (Bosadi) woman's perspective. Masenya (1996:55) re-read Proverbs 31:10–31 from the perspective of the Bosadi and grounded her reading in a feministic liberal perspective, which is linked to an 'African-ness' of a black South African woman.

It was therefore important to pay attention to these previously silent voices and their interpretations of the 'noble woman' of Proverbs 31:10–31. The actuality of this article lies in the fact that the readers, no matter their gender or specific context, can come to new insights and perspectives about the view on and understanding of the value of a 'noble wife'. These new understandings can influence their opinion and treatment of women within their own contexts. If women today look at other women through the eyes of Proverbs 31:10–31, one might look at one's domestic worker differently or have more sympathy for a difficult co-worker regardless of their race, class or cultural difference (Claassens 2015:45).

This article is not a comprehensive contextual reading of Proverbs 31:10–31, as the following aspects still need to be addressed:

- Different interpretations of Proverbs 31:10–31 from the diverse cultural groups in South Africa – the isiXhosa, isiZulu and so forth.
- Different interpretations of Proverbs 31:10–31 from the perspectives of South African women from various socio-economic backgrounds – lower income, middle class and higher income demographics.
- Discourses pertaining to the women of the traditional and more charismatic Church communities in South Africa in relation to Proverbs 31:10–31.
- A comparative reading between a patriarchal and feminist reading of Proverbs 31:10–31.
- The influence of movements such as #MeToo on the interpretation and future relevance of Proverbs 31:10–31.
- An exploration of the notion of human flourishing in relation to Proverbs 31:10–31.

Conclusion

It is evident that women have come a long way in their struggle to be accepted in a world that was and to some degree is still ruled by a patriarchal system. Patriarchal systems often lead to gross violations of women's human rights, well-being and self-worth. Women are often dehumanised and marginalised by these structures. Unfortunately, the Church was or is also part of the patriarchal system, which often leads to dehumanisation of women and other marginalised groups, such as the poor and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex community.

Feminist movements play an integral role in the fight against such patriarchal systems. South African women fought relentlessly for their rights to vote and to be acknowledged as equal to their male counterparts. Women's Day celebrations on 09 August each year are a witness to and serve as a reminder to women of how far they have come.

South African women represent diverse groups from different races, cultures and languages. This should not withhold them from standing together and working together to transform women's lives.

A 'sisterhood' in which the South African women can form a unique group, in which they celebrate and embrace the diversities presented by each woman, is suggested by the writer. A 'sisterhood' can work together as a unit in reaching the same goals, instead of working against each other or against men.

The feminist reading of Proverbs 31:10–31 is unique in the fact that it was suggested by Masenya, a black South African woman, who incorporates some of her culture and understanding in the interpretations of a feminist reading of Proverbs 31:10–31. It is evident that Christian women of all races, class and cultures can identify with the 'noble woman' portrayed in Proverbs 31:10–31 and claim the attributes discussed for themselves.

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Authors' contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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