



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

**Proverbs 31:10-31 from a Ghanaian and (Akan) womanist
perspectives - Inculturation and Liberation Hermeneutics
approach**

by

PAUL NYARKO-MENSAH

**Submitted in fulfilment in accordance with the
requirements for the degree of**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Old Testament studies

FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

at the

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

SUPERVISOR: Prof Dirk J. Human

2023

Declaration

I, Paul Nyarko-Mensah, student number 20809973, hereby declare that this thesis, “Proverbs 31:10-31 From Ghanaian and (Akan) Womanist Perspectives- Inculturation and Liberation Hermeneutics Approach” submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Theology (Old Testament) at the University of Pretoria, is my own original work and has not been previously submitted to any other institution of higher learning for the award of a degree. All sources cited or quoted in this thesis are indicated and acknowledged comprehensively with the bibliography.

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Paul Nyarko-Mensah

July 2023

Dedication

I dedicate this work to all missionaries, the world over and their endeavours.

Acknowledgement

The following people deserve my appreciation in the preparation of this thesis:

- Prof Dirk Johannes Human, my supervisor; for his patience, guidance in the preparation of this thesis and financial support.
- Ms. Christine Nel, Information Specialist at Merensky Library University of Pretoria.
- Mr. Dana Mahan the Director of the Abundant Life Bursary, for facilitating the award of the bursary that gave me the lifeline to continue with my studies.
- Madam Doris Mokgokolo, the Officer for the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.
- Madam Catherine-Ann Sandis, also of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.
- Prof (Pastor) Robert Osei Bonsu, President of West-Central African Division of Seventh-Day Adventist Church; for his concern and financial support.
- Dr (Pastor) J. K. Badu Advisor to the President of West-Central Africa Division of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, for his various supports.
- Dr (Pastor) & Mrs N. T. Odonkor of the West-Central African Division of the Seventh- Adventist church, for always believing in me.
- Mr Benjamin Zogbator, Registrar of Regent University College of Science and Technology, for his support.
- Dr (Pastor) C Anna-Nonoo, Secretary Southern Ghana Union Conference, for his support.
- Pastor Kwabena Twum of Southern Ghana Union Conference of Seventh-Day Adventist Church, for his encouragement.
- Dr Philip Engmann for his encouragement.
- Charles K. Amponsah, for his financial contribution towards the editing of the thesis.
- Sanchia Gordon Hall, for accepting to proofread the thesis.

ABSTRACT

The Akan culture does not treat women the same way it treats its men; there are gender related roles among the Akan cultural practices. Matrilineal inheritance notwithstanding, the Akan woman always plays the second option to her male counterpart. This is obvious in the selection for inheritance which always goes for a male even for nephews, appointments to public office, which follows the same trend no matter her contribution to that society.

The objectives of the study included the investigation of the context of the marginalization and dehumanizing cultural practices among the Akan of Ghana and to ascertain how the virtues of the industrious woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 and the cultural situation of the Akan woman can elucidate each other.

Inculturation and Liberation hermeneutical methodology were used to study the poem. In this methodology every aspect of the explanation is carefully influenced by the perspectives of the receptor community (Akan of Ghana), their past experiences and cultural practices as a people.

Proverbs 31:10-31 is well preserved with few variants which suggest that the poem could have been an adaptation from a male heroic poem. This is made manifest by the several masculine variants in a poem that is meant to eulogise a woman. The presence of Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH) vocabulary and Aramaisms suggest post-exilic Persian period influence on the text.

It is most probable that the industrious woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 is a literary creation by a post-exilic poet, as an antithesis of the historic moral and social failures of the Hebrew womanhood during the 8th century B.C.E. for didactic purpose. This is aimed at the moral and social reengineering of the Hebrew society. It is most probable that Ezra might have had a hand in either the writing, redaction or the editing of the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31.

With the help of contextual methodology (inculturation and Liberation Hermeneutics) the cultural condition of the Akan woman of Ghana is seen as silent champion instead of a

slave and marginalized gender. The Akan woman is empowered for the good of the Akan society with the emulation of the virtues of the Industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31. Future studies could aim at the contribution of some Akan women who managed to shatter the glass ceiling of male dominance for the good of the Akan society, the role and identity of such women would help demystify the misconception about the role and place of women in the Akan society.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used in this study:

AB	The Anchor Bible
ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary
ANE	Ancient Near East
BDB	A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
CBQ	Catholic Bible Quarterly
DBI	Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation
ESV	English Standard Version
GKC	Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar
HALOT	The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament
HICOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HOL	A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
ITL	International Theological Library
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JM	P. Joüon and T. Muraoka (tr.), <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i>
JNSL	Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSOTS	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
KB	The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament
LBH	Late Biblical Hebrew
LXX	The Septuagint

NASB	New American Standard Bible
NASV	New American Standard version
NRSV	New Revised Standard version
NIDOTTE	New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis
OTL	The Old Testament Library
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature. Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature. Monograph Series
TDOT	Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament
TLOT	Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament
TWOT	Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament
VT	Vetus Testamentum
VTS	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	The Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 Background

The Akan people of Ghana are found principally in the seven out of the sixteen regions of the country: “they constitute 52.7% of the population of Ghana” (GSS 2008:8). Beside the slight nuances in their dialects, they share a common cultural heritage which makes them unique from the rest of the ethnic groups which constitute the total population of Ghana. The communal set up of the Akan, the way they understand their world and their complex rules that regulates their way of life: Matrimony; rights to assets and inheritance are important to gaining insight into difficulties that the Akan woman (widow) is confronted with. Ghana is situated in the Southern shore of west Africa and has a land area of about 92,101 square miles. Ghana is a multicultural republic, where both the customary rules and the constitutional regulations govern side by side. It is a unitary state with a popularly elected legislature and a head of state. It is a multi-ethnic nation which has about 100 cultural societies using about 50 languages (Korang-Okrah 2015:9).

The matrilineal inheritance system,¹ common clans and rites of passage (customs concerning birth, puberty rites, marriage rites and rites for the death) makes the Akan of Ghana one big family. In spite of the matrilineal inheritance system which presupposes that children inherit their maternal uncle, the role and the status of an Akan woman is not different from, or better than their counterparts in the patrilineal system of inheritance. In the Akan inheritance system, it may be worse (Sossou 2002:201). This system of family arrangement makes the children the property of the wife’s family, which as a result makes their up keep her responsibility (or that of her brothers’). Due to this, it is common to see a typical wife working from dawn to dusk just to keep food on the table, to put cloth on the

¹ “Two types of lineage systems are in Ghana, matrilineal (inheritance through the female ancestral line) and patrilineal (succession through the male ancestral line). Despite the difference, a common feature shared by the two systems is the preference for males over females in cases of inheritance” (Sossou 2002: 201).

backs of her children, put them to school and even sometimes to support the husband (cf. GSS 2003:46).

However, the societal set-up of the Akan community is patriarchal in nature, where men constitute the village council, assume the leadership of the society as chiefs, go to war, acquire property even for and on behalf of their wives (cf. Korang-Okrah 2015:13-14; Brown 1996:21-41; Bukh 1979:52; Evans 1991:51-99), to the extent that even when a pregnant woman delivers, it is not unusual for people to inquire whether she gave birth to a human being or not (human being referring to the male child). This arrangement makes the wife, the silent champion (or marginalized servant) of the home and its upkeep.

In a typical polygamous home and marriage in general, however, the wives and their children are usually a means of cheap labour for the man (father and husband of the home) (see Korang-Okrah & Haight 2014:4; Korag-Okrah 2015:13-14). Eventually when the man dies his nephews and the extended family drive the wife or wives, and their children away from any property the man might have acquired with the aid of his wife (or wives) and children.² The wife or wives are subjected to dehumanizing widowhood rites,³ with the suspicion that the wife (wives) might have had a hand in the death of her husband. The woman must take care of the children, since they belong to her by custom (Abass & Doskaya 2017:156; cf. Korang-Okrah & Haight 2014:9-11).

When it comes to succession and inheritance in the Akan matrilineal system, the situation of the woman is worse: even though the Akan inherits through their mother's side, succession among the Akan people is always initiated through brothers who share the same mother (it does not matter if they share the same father or not). Females are considered if there are no males, as well as nephews. So, in any inheritance among the Akan inheritance system, which is taken from the mother's lineage, the descent is considered first, followed by sex with the male sex having advantage over the female sex.

² "The wives or wife and children are not considered as members of the husband's lineage" (Korang-Okrah 2015:14).

³ "Widowhood rites are deeply embedded in the socio-political and cultural context of Akan marriage and the multiple roles of wives" (Cattell 2003:49). "Widowhood rites vary somewhat but typically consist of rituals such as eating once a day, public crying/wailing for 15 days, cold water bathing three times a day for 40 days, dressing in black and avoiding suitors for one year or more, and sleeping on a mat instead of a mattress" (Korang-Okrah 2011:4).

Thus, inheritance and succession rules amongst the Akan, emphasis ancestry, gender, age, and other individual potentials (Krang-Okrah 2015:14).

As if that is not enough, when women in general and widows in particular get old, they are usually accused of witchcraft. If they are lucky, they can seek refuge in a witches' camp, but if they are not, most of the time, they are banished from their community or lynched. Ghana is the only country in the world that has camps for witches (though unofficial). It is estimated that over 1000 women and children are currently found in about five witches' camps. Seldom would anybody hear of wizards, let alone banishing them from society with witches (Azongo, Yidana & Musah 2020:29-36; Abass & Doskaya 2017:156).

The advent of the colonial masters did not improve the woman's lot, but rather worsen the woman's plight. The colonial masters relegated the woman to the background of the occupational and socio-economic ladder making her inferior to her male counterpart. Abass & Doskaya (2017:150) claims that "the systematic relegation of women in public life started during the colonial era. Women lost their political, economic, and social power when colonial institutions replaced traditional democratic institutions." Furthermore, Christianity with the help of the androcentric interpretation of the Bible entrenched a culturally held notion about the place and the role of a woman in relation to her male counterpart; this was brought home forcefully since the Akan culture shares a lot in common with the Hebrew culture, especially on the role and status of a woman. Harris (1992:951) opines that "key to understanding the roles, images, and limited appearances of women in the Hebrew Scriptures is the patriarchal organization of the Hebrew society and its family-centred economy. Women's principal function was performed in her role as wife and mother."⁴

⁴ "Ancient Near East in general and in Israel in particular the role and the status of a woman were subject to their cultural limitations. With a few exceptions a woman was restricted to certain culturally prescribed roles. Mesopotamian civilization, consisting of Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian traditions was throughout its long history patriarchal in structure and orientation. The Mesopotamian woman was, with a few exceptions, defined either as the daughter of her father or as the wife of her husband. Women rarely acted as individuals outside the context of their families. Those who did, were either members of the royal or elite families" (Harris 1992:947).

Since the independence of Ghana from British colonialism in 1957 (cf. Abass & Doskaya 2017:145; Gocking 2005:26),⁵ one would expect the woman and her male counterpart to be equally treated; at least the woman would have been judged by the content of her character and her capabilities and not her gender. Unfortunately, this dream is yet to be realized among the women of Ghana, including the Akan woman.

Since the commencement of the fourth republican constitution, promulgated in 1992 (cf. Madsen 2019:3-7) several attempts have been made by different civil society groups with the hope of equating the woman to her male counterpart as a full human being, though different from her male counterpart. Men and women were created equal, even though different to complement each other Gen 1:27 - "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female, he created them." Among these attempts is affirmative action (Tsikata 2009:1), which seeks to reserve some quota of public office solely for women. Almost all governments since 1992 have created a special ministry⁶ of a cabinet level solely to cater for the needs and the up-lift-ment of women to the level of her male counterpart. To date none of these attempts have made any impression on Ghana's patriarchal societal organization. (cf. Madsen 2019:3; GSS 2008:6). "Out of the 275 parliamentary seats only 13 percent were occupied by women even though women constitute 51.5% of the total population of Ghana." Today, the woman is on the lowest rung of the occupational ladder and may receive less remuneration (Arriagada 1990:92)⁷ as compared to her male counterpart with equal qualification. She is most of the times side-stepped for appointments into executive positions in favour of her male counterparts.

⁵ Gold Coast (Ghana) started interacting with the Europeans in 1471, The Portuguese were the first to come followed by the French, English, the Dutch, and the Danes. Colonialism officially commenced on 1874 by the British and ended in 1957(cf. Abass U & Doskaya 2017:145; Gocking 2005:26).

⁶ Currently called, "the ministry of Gender, Children and social protection". "Gender is sometimes viewed as simply being synonymous with women" (Nkabala 2013:385; Scott 1986:1056).

⁷ This study was not done among the Akan of Ghana, however, the information is as true in Ghana, as they are in the Caribbean and Latin America, also developing countries just as Ghana in west Africa. In this study, it was found out that, the average income of a female did not exceed 68% of that of her male counterpart with equal education and experience. In some studies, the income of a male was double of the female co-worker. It was found out that the higher the education, for both the male and female the higher the disparity between them. This can be said of the appointment to higher office in corporations (Arriagada 1990:92).

1.2. Statement of problem

This research investigates why and how the Akan woman is discriminated against in society even though she plays prominent, albeit unappreciated roles in the development of the Akan society. The purpose of this study is therefore to examine, analyse and evaluate possible ideas, factors and causes of patriarchal chauvinism in primal Akan and Hebrew societies, and by means of inculturation and liberation hermeneutics⁸ to uncover the ignored virtues of womanhood to the good of the Akan society. This will be an exegetical study of Proverbs 31:10-31 using the commentary approach to exegesis. The study will also examine the possible life setting of the poem: Proverbs 31:10-31 and allow both cultures to elucidate each other with the hope that the poem with its assumed life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) will empower the Akan woman.

Any research that compares two or more variables is categorized as a study that has its main procedure to be a comparative approach which encourages an analogous explanation of a particular scriptural passage or theme and its African counterpart. Allowing the two to shine light on each other. The standard procedure for interpreting a biblical text is part of this process. Nevertheless, the African scriptural method of applying biblical interpretation is done in a way that the African contextual background has the upper hand in the interpretive process while the traditional biblical exegetical methodology is in a lesser position as an interpretive partner (Holter 2002:88).

Therefore, the study would compare aspects of the Akan socio-cultural context and the Hebrew wisdom literature as they pertain to the socio-cultural context of the author of the poem; Proverbs 31:10-31. Akan women can identify easily with the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 in their contribution to the welfare of their families. Not only are the women bearers of children, but also, immense supporters of their husbands and extended families. It is this reason that I join the womanist to call for the rereading of “chauvinistic passages” in the Hebrew Bible by interfacing them with the virtue passage of Proverbs

⁸ Inculturation and liberation are hermeneutical tools to answer the question of significance or application in an exegetical study (cf. Nyiawung 2013:3).

31:10-31, that extols women's worth for a meaningful human wholeness among the Akan of Ghana.

This is one of several ways of avoiding the indictment of feminists like Oduyoye (1994:42): who argues that usually Christian biblical scholars (often Europeans and largely men) did not consider important the condition of the subjugated human beings into account when reflecting on concepts, philosophies and theories, in the same vein, African men who are scholars not forgetting Bible scholars have not thought it important to include the concerns of females in their intellectual endeavours.

This means that care is taken to resist the temptation of extremism as is characteristic of some over anxious women theologians⁹ (Obiorah 2010:42). I am aware that gender sensitive issues of this sort cannot be easily discussed by males like myself. Nonetheless, objectivity demands that one distances oneself from one's biases and take up the position of a subject to make positive contributions to the debate. In this sense, traditional biblical exegetical methodologies (cf. Ukpong 1995:4; Masenya 2004:2-3; Brueggemann 1993:19) may not be adequate, hence the necessity of employing contextual approaches like the inculturation and liberation hermeneutics which considers the context of the receptor Akan community in reading and uncovering implicit ideas in Proverbs 31:10-31 and apply the outcome to the Akan woman of Ghana. It is in this way that the biblical text can be relevant to the Akan woman and the Ghanaian context in general.

Can the poem empower the Akan woman of Ghana, even if it cannot be situated in real life? Is the Akan woman of Ghana, inferior to her male counterpart, due to her gender related roles she plays in the family economy? Is the industrious woman of Proverbs

⁹Owanikiri (1992:206) postulates that "Leftist activists, on the other hand, capitalize on their scholarship to liberate women from social degradation. They follow a new trend of feminism that seeks to sensitise women sufficiently to assert themselves in society. As Bible experts, they sometimes exaggerate the unfair portrayal of women in the Old Testament. One achieves little with anger and the outcome of the energy expended is not worth the effort. Even, though these activists have succeeded in attracting sympathizers from the opposite gender, they often make greater enemies in the process. Often the message of the Bible is sidetracked in pursuit of the rights of women. Many noteworthy texts that emphasis the role of women is overlooked and much confusion is instilled in other women whose foothold in the faith is still feeble".

31:10-31 a real woman who can be situated in history or a fictional figure with an imaginary life setting? Answers to these questions will help solve the problem of the study.

1.3. Research questions

The following questions will help interrogate the text of Proverbs 31:10-31 and the context of the ordinary Akan woman of Ghana to help solve the research problem:

1. Are there certain cultural practices among the Akan of Ghana which marginalizes and dehumanize their women?
2. Does the culture of the Akan of Ghana and the culture of the author of Proverbs 31:10-31 evaluate the role of women in the same way, or are aspects of these cultures dehumanizing and oppressive to women? What are the current research trends in the studies of Proverbs in general and 31:10-31, as well as feminism?
3. What are the literary and grammatical features of the poem? Why did the Hebrew poet include Proverbs 31:10-31 of a virtuous woman in a collection of sacred poetry in the book of Proverbs?
4. Can Proverbs 31:10-31 be read to empower grass root women in a typical contemporary Akan society of Ghana? Even if she was a literary creation and not a historic figure? Why did the editor of the MT rearrange the chapters from chapter 24:23-34? Can the poem be reread from the perspective of any of the female heroes of the Hebrew nation?
5. Can the *Obaasima* of the Akan society be eulogised like the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31? Is she a marginalized servant or a silent champion of the Akan society? And can the Hebrew culture empower any other culture, even if the industrious woman was not real flesh and blood figure?

1.4. Aim and objectives

The main aim of the study is to examine Proverbs 31:10-31 with inculturation and liberation hermeneutics using the socio-cultural conditions of the ordinary Akan women for the following objectives:

1. To investigate the context of the marginalization and the dehumanizing cultural practices against Akan women of Ghana.
 - To sketch the distinctiveness of the Akan of Ghana.
 - To investigate the cultural identity of the Akan of Ghana.
 - To ascertain what the matrilineal system of inheritance entails.
 - To examine how the family economy and set up disadvantaged the woman in the marriage.
 - To study how the widowhood rites, dehumanize the Akan woman.
 - To understand the requirements of the inheritance of the Akan in relations to the male and female genders.
 - To probe how governmental policies have contributed to this state of marginalization of the Akan woman.
2. To investigate current research trends in Proverbs and the poem (Prov. 31:10-31). Furthermore, to evaluate the significance of parallels in both the Akan of Ghana and the Hebrew cultures in the Ancient Near East, on the roles and the status of women in society. To explore current trends and theories in both feminism and gender studies.
 - To evaluate what constitute wisdom literature in the Hebrew Scriptures.
 - To analyse the content and the divisions of Proverbs.
 - To understand the wisdom motif of the book of Proverbs.
 - To ascertain if the portrait of the woman of valour is a true reflection of the Hebrew culture or it might have been copied from another culture.
 - To investigate who might have been the author, authors, redactor, redactors, or an editor of the passage.
 - To investigate the possible date of the writing of the poem.
 - To investigate the occurrences of Wisdom literature and the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) culture.
 - To find out if the culture that produced the poem and Proverbs in general was androcentric in its orientation.
 - To understand how the Hebrew culture evaluated its women.

- To investigate the role and the status of women in the Ancient Near East (ANE).
 - To evaluate the similarities and differences in both the Akan and the Hebrew cultures, if any.
 - To explore current trends in feminism and gender studies in Ghana.
 - Examine Old Testament scholarship on feminism as they relate to the poem.
3. To ascertain the significance of literary and grammatical features of the poem and how that should influence the understanding of the passage (intra textual analysis) and to ascertain the significance of the placement of the poem in the book of Proverbs (the inter-textual study of Prov. 31:1-9; 31:10-31) and wisdom literature in general.
- Do a translation of the poem: Proverbs 31:10-31.
 - To investigate the textual features of the passage.
 - To understand the relationships between the textual features.
 - To examine structure and the outline of the poem.
 - Investigate the *genre* of the poem.
 - Detailed analysis of the poem.
 - *Sitz in der Literatur* - literary context.
 - To do a literary analysis of Proverbs 31:1-9 and Proverbs 31:10-31.
 - Study Proverbs 31:10-31 in the context of the whole book.
 - Analyse the links between Proverbs 30-31:1-9 and 31:10-31.
 - Examine the links between Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31.
 - Ascertain links between Proverbs 10:1-22:16 and 31:10-31.
 - To suggest the possible life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the poem.
4. To contextualise the findings of the foregoing study and apply it to inculturation and liberation hermeneutics, furthermore, to find out whether the portrait of a virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 is a true reflection of an existing reality of such a woman in the Hebrew history and whether the Akan can be empowered by such culture. In other words, how does the original readers of the poem understand the text.

- To examine how the original readers of the passage understood it.
 - To explore the significance of the rearrangement of chapters in the MT (Paratext).
 - Ascertain which of the female role models of the Hebrew history could be identified as resembling the woman in the poem.¹⁰
 - Womanist, feminist rereading of the passage would be conducted.
 - To evaluate some Akan proverbs about women and its relations to “*Obaasima*” (a virtuous woman among the Akan of Ghana).
 - Does the Akan culture dehumanise and marginalise women
 - To reread the poem using the context of *Obaasima* (a virtuous woman) approach, in other words: to ascertain whether the passage empowers the Akan woman or dehumanise and marginalise her (Liberation hermeneutics).
5. The final chapter synthesises and summarizes the research findings and make recommendations to the Akan society of Ghana and future biblical research, using African Biblical Hermeneutics.
- To synthesise the findings of the above study into Proverbs 31:10-31, and apply the outcome of the enquiry to the research problem and the hypothesis.
 - To make remarks on what the study suggest about whether the passage can be read to empower the Akan woman of Ghana or not.
 - To make recommendation for the future study of the passage.

1.5. Delimitation

There is the need to set boundaries for the study of Proverbs 31:10-31 in the Akan context of Ghana. There are over hundred ethnic groups speaking over fifty dialects (Korang-Okrah 2015:9). However, this research would be restricted to the Akan ethnic group in Ghana. Although the Akan in Ghana is a multi-ethnic group with diverse dialects and

¹⁰ “The names of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah and Ruth are indispensable to the rehearsal of this list just as Esther and Eve” (Harris 1992:949-951; cf. Jansen 2020:74).

some cultural difference, nevertheless the dissimilarities are too minimal and negligible to affect the overall outcome of the study.

The Hebrew Bible is replete with passages which could be used to challenge erroneous cultural practice against women, but this research would be restricted to Proverbs 31:10-31. This is because, my Master of Philosophy thesis was on Isaiah 3:16-4:1, where the women of Zion were accused of haughtiness, overly self-conscious and oppression of the weak and the needy, as a result an impending judgement for the nation. I am convinced that this passage, Proverbs 31:10-31, is an answer to the problem of the women of the Hebrew nation in Isaiah 3:16-4:1 and Amos 4: 6 where the virtuous woman is projected as a role model for the youth.

1.6. Methodology

1.6.1. Introduction

Groenewald (2007:1017-1019; cf. Le Roux 2019:3-5; 2017:1-15) argued strongly the place of methodology in Old Testament exegesis. He claims that the process of collection and organization of the material which ended up as the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament requires that to understand same, the choice of appropriate methodology is an imperative. He situated his argument in the background of the age-old debate about methodology in South Africa, Europe and in the circles of biblical scholarship in general. Furthermore, to understand a biblical text, the past records of the people who recorded the incidence, those who received the text, delivered it, edited, and read it again must be put into consideration (Groenewald 2007:1017; see Schniedewind 2004:5). The history of biblical studies and its attendant methodological requirement has had a checked path, but the debate continues. During the infancy of Christianity, African biblical practices in the Alexandrian approach initiated by Clement, Origen, and others in the 3rd century C.E. was instrumental in the formation of Biblical interpretation (Trigg 1988:21).

Some scholars are of the opinion that the groundwork which was placed by these practices which was substantially metaphorical and unscientific continued in the European churches until the dawn of academic illumination. This procedure was

exchanged with the historical critical procedure in the 18th century, which was succeeded by the literary procedure in the 20th century, and have remained the main scholarly biblical study methodology in the African continent (cf. Onwu 1984/85:35; Le Roux 1993:1190).

The academic approach to the study of the Christian Scriptures in Africa in the recent past owes its existence to the European academic endeavour of scripture. With a few exceptions, African biblical scholars, both local and foreign trained have been equipped with the European theological approach to biblical studies (cf. LeMarquand 1997:163; Nyiawung 2013:2-4). Nevertheless, by the turn of the 20th century, a new approach to biblical interpretation emerged in Africa south of the Sahara, out of the desire to make the biblical text and their interpretation relevant to the receptor community. The exact nature of this method is its goal to bring together the scriptural passage and the African background by consciously applying the approach that will connect the two (Holter 1995:33-46). Meyer (2015:3) is convinced that it is high time Old Testament scholars in South Africa make the text relevant in the current context. He wondered why scholars in the Old Testament are reluctant in relating the text to context, since, in his opinion, the priestly tradition used older materials and related them to the context to produce the “H” tradition in the second half of the book of Leviticus.

1.6.2. Inculturation models

The contextual methodology is concerned with making the receptor community the centre of the interpretation and not those that produce it or the text. In this regard, Inculturation and liberation hermeneutics are explained as: a contextual hermeneutic procedure which has as its goal to make any society of everyday people and their background of everyday way of life the theme of explanation of scriptural passage using their theoretical settings and the participation of everyday people during the explanation. This African explanatory method could be classified into two comprehensive, procedural types as Inculturation models representing inculturation theological agenda and methods, and liberation models for the category of liberation theology, outline and practices (Ukpong 1995:5-6; 2002:12).

Therefore, inculturation hermeneutics represents the procedure of scriptural explanation which has as its goal the African background as the theme of the explanation. In other

words, every aspect of the explanation is carefully influenced by their perspectives, their past experiences, and practices as a people. These life experiences include commerce and trade, leadership structure and their relationship with their deity as constituents of inculturation hermeneutics (Ukpong 1995:5-6; 2002:12; see Nyiawung 2013:3-9). This biblical method of explanation is different from those that uses another background as the theme of explanation and apply the outcome to the African background. What is more, it is also different from those that reads the background into the passage. The focal point of inculturation hermeneutics is making the scripture and its message critique, modern communities and their people (Ukpong 1995:4; cf. 2002a:23; see Masenya 2016:1-6).

Five parts constitutes the explanation process of inculturation: the explainer; the background; the message; theoretical agenda (conceptual framework) and methodology which are carefully influenced by how they see the world, and their history among their social and cultural background that has been the theme of the explanation. Background simply means the context by which the passage is to be explained. Specifically, it is the prevailing human settlement, such as a country, a religious sect, a tribal or racial assemblage which has been set aside as the theme of the explanation with the inhabitants' way of seeing their world and their past experiences, societal and commercial set ups, leadership, their sacred world view, and encounter (Ukpong 1995:4; 1995:6; cf. 2002b:12). Furthermore, the aim of the explanation is a religious understanding of the text inside a current background (Ukpong 2002b:24).

To this study, the background is the perspective, historical, societal, commercial, party-political and spiritual life encounters of the Akan woman of Ghana. The interpretation of the passage would involve an interactive engagement between the biblical text (Prov. 31:10-31) and a particular contemporary socio-cultural matter (such as the status, oppression and marginalization of the Akan woman of Ghana). Proverbs 31:10-31 would then critique the Akan culture, and the Akan cultural perspective broadens and enhances the meaning of the text of Proverbs 31:10-31. An integrated view of reality would be maintained in the hermeneutical process in such a way that religious issues would not be discussed separate from their secular dimension in implication and vice-versa. Thus, Inculturation and liberation are hermeneutical tools to answer the question of significance

or application in an exegetical study. They are not intended to be an end in themselves (cf. Nyiawung 2013:3).

“The interpretation would rotate on the following axes: the inner logic of the text: the immediate and larger literary context of the text; the historical context of the text; and the contemporary context of the interpreter” (Ukpong 1995:7). “Emphasis would be put on a careful analysis of the structure of the textual argument (including rhetorical analysis) in the text to grasp the inner logic of the text. The text would be exposed within its literary context, which is the next axis, and is because the text (Prov. 31:10-31) is not seen as independent of the larger whole to which it belongs, nor is the Biblical canon seen as the total of its parts” (Ukpong 1995:7). Rather, Ukpong (1995:7) notes that a text is seen as “a living component in the interactive process of interpretation and must be treated as a part of the whole.”

The next step or axis would be the historical context of Proverbs 31:10-31, in this instance, the text would not be seen as standing alone, but as having its place in a specific historical, social, and cultural background or contexts. Therefore, a significant phase in the explanation of the text is the examination of the social and cultural background of Proverbs 31:10-31. Ukpong (1995) is of the opinion that it is crucial to determining the orientation of the text, and giving a historical perspective to Proverbs 31:10-31, without which it is impossible to make a clear assessment of the biblical world that made the text meaningful in the first place. A careful analysis of the historical and socio-cultural context of the text is thus important for making the text resonate in the present context (Ukpong 1995:7).

The most enduring and precise characteristic of inculturation hermeneutics is the detailed examination of the background of the researcher. The warning here is that this should not be mistaken to mean just reading or contemplating the researcher’s background into the outcome of the explanation. A detailed examination of the researcher’s background helps him or her to be aware of what is contributing to his or her understanding of the text and to make good use of them and oversee those elements. It will also contribute to the interpreter’s comprehension of the text in a modern situation (Ukpong 1995:7; cf. 2002b:12).

Now, the current socio-cultural and religious perspective of the Akan woman of Ghana would be analysed and the findings juxtaposed with the biblical text to 'illuminate each other'. Here, the research would argue that the text of Proverbs 31:10-31 places the woman and her male counterpart as equal even though created differently from each other. Their gender difference is meant to complement each other; and the Akan woman of Ghana should consider her role as a wife and the mother of the family, as complementary and not subjugation. Erroneous cultural practices which make the Akan woman inferior to her male counterpart would be subjected to the illumination attained from the analysis of the text.

Inculturation and liberation hermeneutics share a lot in common except that they vary in the emphasis they place on each of those factors. Both liberation and inculturation derived their origin from the everyday life encounters of everyday people. However, liberation hermeneutics stresses the importance of commerce and societal leadership as the most important factors. Race and class not sacred relationship with a deity and communal values are the most important factors in liberation hermeneutics. While inculturation is flexible with the types of social theoretical agenda (sociological conceptual framework) it depends on, liberation hermeneutics is a lot more exact, depending largely on Marxist theoretical agenda (West 1995:200; cf. Mosala 1989:4).

The major variance amid inculturation and liberation hermeneutics are aspects of African societal life, its emphases (theology and communal values against commerce and communal leadership) how they relate to the scripture (faith against doubt) and the tools they draw on to do interpretation (flexible societal examination against historical-materialist examination). These parallels and variances create how they link text with the background and how interpretation occurs (West 1995:200-214).

The Hebrew biblical text (Prov. 31:10-31) is the focus of this research. This text was shaped in a specific social and historical background, and the goal of this study is to hear the characteristic, primeval voice of the passage inside its individual social and historical context.¹¹ Then the passage can have conversation with the Akan context. This would be

¹¹ An exegetical study will be conducted on the pericope before the hermeneutical tools (inculturation and liberation) will be applied to the text to derive the contextual interpretation of the text.

done by locating the text historically and literarily, using historical-critical (diachronic) and literary (synchronic) tools and then situating the historical and literary text sociologically, within a particular social context, using a sociological tool: a historical-materialist (cf. Mosala 1993:264-265).

This research, instead of restricting itself to only historical-critical and sociological tools, would also make use of literary tools, because of the *genre* of the pericope (poetry), literary tools like rhetorical criticism and structural analysis¹² would be applied to the text with the hope of locating the text within its linguistic and literary¹³ contexts (cf. Nadar 2004:60-79; West 2004:160-173). The purpose is the same - an exegesis of the poem under study (Prov. 31:10-31) letting the Akan context to speak with its personal voice.

The research would be both a literature study and exegetical study; all that has been said so far were concerned with the literary aspect of the research. The extent it reflects oppression/ liberation of women.

“The starting point is analysis of the contemporary context against which the text is to be interpreted, an analysis of the context of the Biblical text. The text is then read dynamically within the contemporary context that has been analysed. This involves entering the text with a critical awareness about the contemporary context and allowing it to evoke in the reader appropriate reactions, responses and commitments about the context” (Ukpong 1995:3-14).

Ukpong (2001:24-25) insisted that “exegesis and hermeneutics are thus not separate entities. They merge into one entity, thus enabling the past to collapse into the present because, there is one process of a reader who is critically aware of their context interacting with the Biblical text analysed in its context.”

¹² Rhetorical criticism: can be described as “studying the literary artistry or rational argument of a text”. Structural analysis: “examining the literary and semantic structure of a text” (cf. Stuart 1984:111-112).

¹³ Examine the literary features of the pericope to determine the meaning of the text. These will include *genre*, structure, composition and rhetoric analysis of the pericope.

1.6.3. Womanist and feminist reading

Womanism, feminism is geared towards the championing of women equality with men. However, since there are some fundamental differences between the two women groups over the role and place of men in their fight for equality, this study will take the side of the group which stand is inclusive and African, whenever they diverge on this point. While feminism sees men in general and their men in particular as the source of the problem of sexism, womanism acknowledges the existence of sexism as a problem in general. However, due to their shared history of struggle against racism and classism, they do not consider their men as the problem but as comrades in the struggle for equal rights. In this regard the research will take the path of womanism when they diverge on the grounds of men as partners and not enemies. Feminist, womanist reading of the passage will subject the passage and the Akan context to the scrutiny of perceived inequalities between men and women. Where there is established inequality, the passage will critique the perceived inequality using the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 and make suggestions (cf. Bellis 2007:6-12; Masenya 2004:27-66; Jansen 2018:130-149).

1.7. Hypothesis

The industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is thus a literary creation as an antithesis of the moral and social decay of the Hebrew women in their history for didactic purpose aimed at moral and social reengineering of the Hebrew society. The Akan woman would be empowered for the good of the Akan society if the virtues of the industrious woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 are emulated.

1.8. Research design

The anticipated research falls within the area of biblical studies. Solving the main problem will require four major steps; first, the study will analyse the cultural challenges of the Akan woman, against which the text would be read. Second, it would also analyse the historical and literary contexts of Proverbs 31:10-31. Third, Proverbs 31:10-31 would be read carefully within the current Akan context that has been analysed, and would be related to inculturation and liberation hermeneutics. Fourth, this would involve entering

the biblical text (poem) with the critical awareness about the Akan context and allow it to evoke in the researcher appropriate reactions, responses and commitments about the context. Some practical recommendation will emanate from the analysis.

1.9. Chapter division

The study was divided into five chapters. Here follows the division:

1.9.1. Chapter one - Introduction

The cultural challenges of an Akan woman, the research problem, aim and objectives, research questions, methodology, hypothesis, chapter outline, terminology and orthographical keys.

1.9. 2. Chapter two - Literature review

Scholarly works on the text (Prov. 31:10-31) will be reviewed with the objectives of the study as its aim. Current trends on gender and feminism studies as they relate to biblical studies and the Ancient Near East (ANE), Old Testament and the Ghanaian context will also be examined to situate the poem and the Akan culture. Furthermore, this chapter evaluates the significance of parallels in both the Akan of Ghana and the Hebrew cultures in Ancient Near East, on the role and the status of women in society. A critique of the androcentric biblical culture and woman's place in the Bible or otherwise will be dealt with.

1.9.3. Chapter three - Synchronic and diachronic analyses

This chapter comprises the analysis of the textual variants and translation of the text (poem). There is contextual analysis of the poem, these includes the immediate literary context of the poem. Verbal analysis includes lexical and grammatical examination of significant words and passages, while the literary analysis touches on the *genre*, structure, composition, and rhetorical examination of Proverbs 31:10-31.

The chapter also deals with the significance of the placement of the poem in the book of Proverbs and wisdom literature in general (intra-textual and inter-textual study of

Proverbs 31:1-9; 31:10-31). How do the passages around the poem help us to understand the image of the virtuous woman?

1.9.4. Chapter four - Appropriation of Proverbs 31:10-31 and Akan women

The chapter among others contextualise the study so far and explores how the Hebrews see the industrious woman of the poem, to identify who, the mother of Lemuel was, a *paratext* will help us speculate on who Agur and Lemuel were. The story of Esther, a Hebrew queen in Persia will be read against the story of the woman in the poem. The poem will be read against the feminist and womanist perspective, and same will be used to reread the poem against the background of the Akan woman of Ghana; thus, Inculturation and Liberation hermeneutical analysis is undertaken. Here the passage is analysed against the Akan contextual background. Whether the passage empowers the Akan woman or not.

1.9.5. Chapter five - Synthesis

The final chapter synthesises and summarizes the research findings and make recommendations to Akan society of Ghana and future biblical research, using African Biblical Hermeneutics. This includes review of the problem statement, objectives of the study, hypothesis, methodology, chapter division and the conclusion will take cognizance of the research questions.

1.10. Terminology and orthography

1.10.1. Orthographical remarks

The Harvard reference style is used in this research. Abbreviations of books of the Bible will be listed as recommended by NTSSA English. Except for the text of the poem which is my translation, every other Bible quotation in the text is indicated, otherwise it is from the New King James version, the Septuagint and the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* are also utilised.

The Hebrew font used in the research is Society for Biblical literature Hebrew font size 12.

1.10.2. Terminology

The following terms need definition:

Terms	Definition
Aramaisms	The influence of the Aramaic language and culture on other languages and culture (Yoder 2001:24).
Inculturation Hermeneutics	Inculturation hermeneutics “designates an approach to biblical interpretation which seeks to make the African context, the subject of interpretation which means that every dimension of the interpretive process is consciously informed by the world view of, and the life experience within that culture” (Ukpong 1995:6).
Liberation Hermeneutics	It is an African interpretive process which is interested in the political and economic marginalization of the people and how to solve them by interpreting the relevant scriptures (West 1995:200).
Diachronic analysis	The study of a text through time: how a text has been shaped and reshaped over the years.
Synchronic analysis	The study of a text as a finished product: The text is dealt with as it is now not how it got here.
Context	“It refers generally to, the background against which the Biblical text is to be interpreted” (Ukpong 1995:6; cf. 2002b:12).
Rhetorical Criticism	“It is concerned with how a literary unit usually a passage is put together.” (Stuart 1984:112).
Structural analysis	“It is usually employed to describe the way that larger units of text (passages) are composed of their various elements of content” (Stuart 1984:111).

<i>Paratext</i>	“It is how an editor, redactor or an author could use the arrangement of paragraphs, headings, chapters and even books to reenforce the message he/she wants to deliver to his or her audience” (Goswell 2016:82).
African Biblical Hermeneutics	“Is a shift of paradigm from the text, its author as well as its context to the context of the subject of exegesis as a contextual approach of Biblical criticism” (Nyiauwung 2013:1).
Feminist reading	“Biblical hermeneutics from the perspective of women’s emancipation/liberation” (Masenya 2004:27).
Womanist reading	“African-American feminist or feminist of colour” this attempt to accommodate all black women (Walker 1983: xi). “This approach takes into account the African-American-ness of a woman in biblical or theological studies” (Masenya 2004:121).
<i>Obaasima</i>	An Akan woman of worth.
Bosadi	“An ideal womanhood in the Northern Sotho context” (Masenya 1995:5).
Kethib	“The words are written in Hebrew text” (Longman III 2006:17).
Qere	“The words to be read in the Hebrew text” (Longman III 2006:18).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature review

2.1. Introduction

One of the first things a researcher does is highly procedural, and that is, detailed examination of related literature in the field of that study, this includes Old Testament studies. Since the 19th century it has become customary for an educated inquiry into past events and any phenomenon, does not start without first doing detailed study of what has transpired before (Hahn 1956:3).

In recent years the resurgence of interest in wisdom literature is heart-warming for theological studies, especially in the Hebrew scriptures. Even though it does not boast of revelatory acts in its history, it is gradually becoming clear that it has its own rights to the cult of the Hebrew nation which cannot be said to be of non-religious origin or recently acquired from its neighbours (Childs 1985:210; cf. Dell 2006:9).

This section of the study, seeks to undertake a careful examination and an analysis of the available written scholarly documents on wisdom literature (Prov.). The main purpose of this chapter is to attain an illumination for the studies. It is not only to examine, but also to assess the importance of similarities and differences between the Akan of Ghana on one hand, the Hebrew and the Ancient Near Eastern cultures on another. On the status and the roles of women in their societies, and how such influenced the writing and reception of the poem (Prov. 31:10-31) and how it is understood today.

2.2. Constituents of wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible

There is a growing interest in the section of the Hebrew Bible, which is referred to as wisdom literature. Scholars are almost in agreement about what constitutes wisdom literature in the Bible. Proverbs, Job and Qoheleth have been curdled off and set aside to form a group of its own, known as sapiential¹⁴ literature. This is because of their content, most of what we can describe as sapiential literature can be found in these collections of

¹⁴ Basically, it means 'to be wise' it originated from the Latin root word 'sapere' and sapiential is an adjective of the word (Waltke & Yu 2007:897; Cf. Jansen 2018:29)

writings and have characterization consistently identified as sapiential literature. Sometimes such works can be found among other writings which are not identified as such, however, such an occurrence can be described as spin-off from wisdom into another writings (Dell 2006:5).

The sapiential literature in the Hebrew scripture is concerned with how to steer one's life through the maze of life fruitfully. What constitute the sapiential literature of the Hebrew scripture is not unanimously agreed on. However, whatever the demarcation of the boundaries Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes are included. Even though some commentators add Song of songs and the Roman Catholics add other extra biblical writings such as Sirach and the wisdom of Solomon. What is more, there are some Psalms that have been found to have wisdom characterization¹⁵ (Bartholomew 2016:16-17). Notwithstanding, this study would limit the Old Testament wisdom literature to the traditional books that have been accepted by the Old Testament canon as being wisdom in its nature and classification (Prov., Job and Eccl). Nevertheless, this would not stop any comparison with those other wisdom literature if it becomes necessary.

Proverbs carries an array of connotations among which are the impression of contrast, the standard of etiquettes and the ability to decipher concealed facts. Further to this definition it is claimed that the book of Proverbs is a gathering of contrast which has been arrived at as a result of keenly looking at what happens around us and pondering over them to gain an insight to direct the path of individuals and society into righteousness (Hill & Walton 2000:356). The book of Proverbs is a large manual of instruction (1:2-7). This makes the book a catalogue of various instructions on wise living for both the young and the old, male and female, rich or poor. Above all, it is a book of wisdom, not just a wise behaviour or wise teachings, but also, wisdom itself. It is not only about doing, but also about knowing (Fox 1997:613 Cf. Ndogo, 2014:172). Sapiential literature has always been an integral part of the Hebrew scripture. The prophet Jeremiah revealed that the three cardinal offices of the Hebrew nation, are clergymen, whose work it was to explain the rules and regulations of the society; the prophets who spoke on behalf of God and

¹⁵ Waltke & Diewert (1999b:295) includes Psalms 37 and 49; Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sirah) and wisdom of Solomon both of which are apocryphal books. Clifford (1998:17) includes psalms, such as Ps 1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, and 128.

the wisemen or women who advised the society (Jer 18:18; see also Firth & Wilson 2016:12).¹⁶

Subjects that are conspicuous elsewhere received inadequate consideration in the wisdom books. God's dealing with the nation, exodus, judgement, redemption, however, the wisdom books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes are prominent in everyday life. Wisdom literature focuses instead on ordinary things of everyday life, buying and selling, raising up children, eating, finding a wife or husband, and so on. This gives the Old Testament wisdom literature a multicultural or more universal flavour. The statesmen were primarily aware of their fellow human beings rather than as Hebrews and Gentiles (Firth & Wilson 2016:12). For a long time, wisdom literature was seen as an adopted child of the Hebrew scriptures. There were subtle suggestions to the effect that, wisdom literature could only be foreign and not indigenous to the Hebrew culture. The allegation arose, mainly, because, wisdom literature is bereft of subjects which are akin to the theology and history of the Hebrews. Themes, such as, how the Hebrews departed from Egypt, the victory and occupation of the promised land, and how their legal jurisprudence was developed. Also, the messianic hope, the redemption from sin and how sin and sinners will eventually be dealt with. But this should be seen as unique characteristics of wisdom literature and not its alienation from the national heritage (Firth & Wilson 2016:12).

The settings in life of wisdom among the Hebrew people could be found among a certain category of men¹⁷ whose duty it was to compile the sapiential knowledge. However, the sapiential knowledge of the Hebrew nation also had some connection with those of the other neighbouring nations in the Ancient Near Eastern environment. The instruction of Amenemope brought home the realization that Hebrew wisdom was not an isolated occurrence. Before Hebrew wisdom literature were written down, they circulated in their oral form as early as their origin as a people. This means that there is a long history behind the evolutionary trajectory of the Hebrew sapiential literature. They might have

¹⁶ Hill & Walton (1991:359) include the kings to the leadership in Israel (cf. Jer 18:18; Ezek 7:26-27).

¹⁷ "The wise men or counsellors, generally were associated with the royal court, as reflected in Proverbs and Ecclesiastics. They were compilers and assemblers of wisdom literature, both of Hebrew and of foreign nations" (Hill & Walton 1991:359).

started as short educational quotations, especially in Proverbs. However, in the course of time they might have metamorphosed into documented text especially as they developed, they might have taken on religious tone as compared with its earlier logical undertone (Bartholomew 2016:20).

God¹⁸ is the final source of all wisdom, however, guardians, instructors and peers can also disseminate it to their children, students, and colleagues respectively. Wisdom is basically a practical application of knowledge which makes it practical and not intellectual. The main craftsman in the erection of the tabernacle (Ex 31:1-5; 35:10, 25-26, 30-35) was given rare understanding (skill, acumen, understanding) by divinity for the job. Shipwrights and how to pilot a ship on the oceans (Ezek. 27:8-9) required special knowledge, as did farmers (Isa 28:23-29) who knew how to execute their responsibilities (Firth and Wilson 2016:12). To understand any document, one of the first things that must be considered is to find out who wrote that material. The next section explores possible author/authors, redactor/redactors, or editor/editors of the book of Proverbs and the poem: Proverbs 31:10-31.

2.3. Authorship of the book of Proverbs

2.3.1. Solomon's authorship

There is a degree of uncertainty about the authorship of the poem under study, and Proverbs in general. There is a Hebrew tradition taught by their teachers which credit king Solomon (ca. 970-930) with the writing of the Song of Songs while he was young, Proverbs while he was in his middle age and Ecclesiastes as an old man (Baba Bathra 15a; Estes 2005:213; Longman III 2006:23). However, advancement in the studies of wisdom literature in general and Proverbs in particular has dispelled the initial notion that Solomon was the author of the whole book. It is also gradually becoming clear that the whole book could not have had one authorship, in other words, it was not composed as unit, rather, as composite. King Solomon was associated with the sapiential tradition among the Hebrews like a seal of authority and authentication. Who will not respect

¹⁸ Clifford (1998:26) reveals that in Mesopotamia, wisdom belongs to the gods and the human sages are at the bottom of the chain.

wisdom that originates from a king who was credited with wisdom by God. It is possible that Solomon might have had some connection with the wisdom tradition in the nation, especially the book of Proverbs. But to credit him with the whole book of Proverbs is not supported by any evidence (Dell 2006:4). Longman III agrees that Solomon's name at the beginning of the book (1:1), is not to attribute the whole book to him, but perhaps, to acknowledge his initial contribution to the collection (Longman III 2006:25).

2.3.2 Composite authorship (anthology)

It is worthy of note that the book's internal evidence does not support Solomon as the sole author of the book. It talks about the men of Hezekiah (Prov. 25:1-29) who collected the wisdom of Solomon, the sayings of anonymous wise men (Prov. 22:17-24:34), the saying of Agur of Massa (Prov. 30) and Lemuel's mother (Prov. 31:1-31). It is therefore evident that several portions were gathered or authored by different personalities over different periods of time and possibly different cultures. A clear dichotomy should be made between when the materials circulated as folklore before it was put together as a written document. It might have had a long journey of gathering, revision, and amendments before it was written down as a book (Dell 2006:5). Fox (2015:7-8) suggests that the word author does not denote one individual who really penned the entire document. He explains that during the development of a book or any written work, there can be many contributors who added their opinions to the document. It is especially difficult to determine in the case of Proverbs, this is because there were many people involved during the line of production. Where we have writers of sayings, editors, redactors, and professional copyists, who might have deliberately altered some portions of the manuscript. So, when we talk about author it encompasses all those who had something to do with it from the beginning to the finish (Fox 2015:7-8).

2.3.3. Authorship of Proverbs 31:10-31

Though some Hebrew scholars, following the rabbinic teaching try to associate Solomon with Lemuel, there is no conclusive evidence to that effect. Suggesting in effect, that, the mother of Lemuel to be Bathsheba (Apple 2011:175). Some scholars reason that the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is regarded by some commentators erroneously as

an independent section apart from the previous poem. However, the rule of thumb is that every separate section has its own heading, so since there is none at the beginning of verses 10-31, it presupposes that this section is like the saying of Lemuel's mother in the previous section (Prov. 31:1-9). In this regard, the writer of the poem of the ideal woman should not be looked for outside of the author of verses 1-9: the mother of Lemuel. This presupposes that the poem in verses 10-31 is a woman's report of a woman's responsibilities in the family set up. But Agur and Lemuel of Massa are not as well-known as the wise king Solomon of the Hebrew nation (Goldingay 2010:607; Waltke 2005:501, see also, Koptak 2003:672; Kitchen 2006:710, and Wendland 2006:1251). Hill & Walton (2000:358-359) opines that "these two names could be associated with the northern Arabian tribe of one of the sons of Ishmael" (Gen 25:14; 1Chron 1:30).

Some scholars, on the other hand, disagree with Goldingay's argument of absence of heading signifying continuity/unity of the chapter. Fontaine (1988:497, cf. Cohen 1945:211; see also Whybray 1972:183) is of the opinion that the poem's internal structure shows that it is of different stock and not a continuation of the previous section (Prov. 30:1-9). A close look at the book of Proverbs shows that the book could not have been composed as a unit, but rather, like an anthology. It is a collection of different writings from different times and places. What should engage our attention now about authorship, should be the final authors/editors/redactors. Whether, the poem (Prov. 31:10-31) and the antecedent poem (Prov. 31:1-9) could have had the same editor/author. Therefore, our interest in this section is the examination of possible redactor/redactors/editors and if possible, authors of the book of Proverbs and the poem (Prov. 31:10-31).

Some scholars, including Masenya, despite the obvious,¹⁹ insist that the poem was most probably authored by a man, possibly a high-class elite urban dweller. They argue that the woman was not an independent person, since her work was to enhance her husband and her children (Masenya 2004:79; cf. Swidler 1979:125; Fontaine 1988:516).

¹⁹Cf: Brenner, (1993:127; Goldingay 2010:607) the rule of thumb is that every independent section has its own heading, an absence of one presupposes that the previous heading still applies. However, this argument will only be applicable if we are referring to the MT. this is because, the arrangement of the chapters in the LXX does not place verses 10-31 immediately after verses 1-9 (cf. Longman III 2006:29).

It is most likely that the mother of Lemuel, after advising her son in verse 1-9, continued to advise her daughter or daughters in the following section (cf. Brenner 1993:127; Goldingay 2010:607). This poem, as the heading portrays at the beginning of the chapter, is the saying of the mother of Lemuel. This view will be the position of this study until more compelling evidence to the contrary is developed. The next section investigates the issue of the possible date of the poem.

2.4. Possible date of Proverbs

2.4.1. Difficulty in dating Proverbs and 31:10-31

The aim of this section is to investigate the date of the text under study (Prov. 31:10-31). However, since the text belongs to a subunit (Prov. 30-31:1-31) in a book (Proverbs), it is worthwhile to extend the scope to cover the date of the whole book of Proverbs while maintaining our focus on the date of the poem.

One of the difficulties in dating the poem is its possible foreign origin. Proverbs 30-31 have a subheading ascribing them to personalities who are not known in the history of the Hebrew nation, namely Agur and Lemuel; (see also Whybray 1994a:165). Some scholars have argued that these names were not historical figures (Cf. Plaut 1961 & Scott 1965). This issue will be explored again in chapter four under the sub-title why did the final editor of MT reorganize the book of Proverbs from chapter 24:23-34-31:10-31? However, it is most probable that they were historical figures by parity of reason, in that all the names associated with the first four collection were historical figures.

It is worthwhile that before any inquiry is done into the date of the composition of the book of Proverbs,²⁰ we must heed the advice of Perdue (1997:79) who opines that “any attempt to provide some social and historical background to Proverbs (text) is fraught with peril.” This is because the book was not authored as a unit, but as collections from different

²⁰Delitzsch (1973:3) insists that the book of Proverbs is a mosaic of intellectual products of at least three eras of Proverbial poetry. Therefore, he dated the text late. Bartholomew (2016:18; Weeks 1994) agrees to the late date of Proverbs and Job to the fifth century B.C.E. Further contrasted Toy's argument for a date of composition around 200 B.C.E with the earliest part of Proverbs around 350 B.C.E. With the discovery of the widespread and ancient nature of the Ancient Near Eastern wisdom in the early 19 century, the late date (350-200 B.C.E.) lost favour.

authors and different periods, which were put together as a book (cf. Murphy 1960:8; Fontaine 1988:495). Yoder (2003:427; cf. Claassens 2016:10) accepts that “dating this poem is very difficult. However, on the grounds of linguistics, it is placed during the Persian period. She further emphasized that some scholars have dated the poem on the grounds of thematic evidence, structural features and biblical parallels. However,” Brown (1981:171) insist that “neither the materials nor the redaction of Proverbs can be closely dated.”

2.4.2. Late date of Proverbs and Proverbs 31:10-31

There is some degree of unanimity about the first section of the book (1-9), it is generally being accepted that this section is late (post-exilic). Which was added to the whole book as a preface (cf. Clifford 1999:6; Perdue 1997:80; Dell 1997:147; see also Estes 2005:216), however, Harrison (1969:1016) casts doubt over this assertion and wonders if any part of the book is really late.

Because the poem is ancient, unique and does not have detailed information about the issues discussed, commentators have had difficulty using the poem to study the set-up of the Hebrew family system and its organization in the Biblical days. However, with the help of contemporary literature, great insight can be gleaned from their social and economic life of the time and the role and status of a Hebrew wife if we analyse it against the Athenian wife as found in *Oeconomicus*. That notwithstanding, there is a great cloud of doubt concerning the date of composition of the poem of the virtuous woman. There is no unanimity concerning the date of writing among commentators with suggestions vacillating between before the commencement of the monarchy to the time of the Greek empire (the 10th century to the 2nd century B.C.E.). However, in this range of time the late date is a lot more probable for the writing of the poem. Considering that the poem in Proverbs 31:10-31 was added at the latter part of the process of compilation, some scholars have suggested that it could be an appendix that was added after the process of compilation of the book of Proverbs was done (5th- 4th century B.C.E). Making the poem contemporary with Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* (Lang 2004:188; Pomeroy 1994; Cf. Fox 2009:849).

Masenya (2004:72) also agrees with other scholars that it is difficult to date this poem; however, the family regained its right of place during the post exilic period and place the passage after the post exilic Persian period. Some scholars have suggested the Achaemenid era for the date of writing of the poem. However, the post-exilic Persian period seem plausible. This is because the woman of virtue in the poem (Prov. 31:10-31) was made up of bits and pieces of the image of post-exilic Persian woman, especially those from higher society. Generally, the post-exilic Persian period had good road network that facilitated information dissemination and ease of travelling. This on the other hand, increased trade, and international commerce among the nations far and near. Palestine was not excluded from the benefits of the Persian empire which included a liberated view of women's status (Yoder 2003:428).

Based on the missing Canaanite-Phoenician teaching document, Albright (1955:1-15) does not seem to agree with the post-exilic Persian period dating of book of Proverbs and the poem (Prov. 31:10-31). While its concluding editorial works might have been done around the fifth century B.C.E, it does not have any material that can be described as of the period after the deportation into Babylon. The sayings in the book of Proverbs could be traced back to the beginning of the kingship in Israel (Albright 1955:1-15). Not only Albright, but also Camp (1985) as well, claims that there is no compelling evidence to date the book of Proverbs (not excluding 1-9;31) during the period after the return of the exile in Babylon. This is because here is the possibility that materials of more ancient might have been used in the formulation of the manuscript (Camp1985:187). When the book of Proverbs was written would be difficult to ascertain, that is if it was written as a unit, however, the final editing of the document could be speculated to be around the date sometimes after the return of the Babylonian exile. This conclusion could be drawn due to all the evidence both internal and external that have been adduced so far.

2.4.3. Post-exilic date of the poem

There is a growing unanimity among scholars about the possible final redaction/editing of the book of Proverbs, despite the contending suggestions about its possible composition. This consensus among scholars' favour's the post-exilic date (Cf. Fontaine 1988:495; Murphuy1960:9ff; Fontaine1992:145; Camp1985:233-254; Scott 1965:15; also, Masenya

2004:70), possibly early post-exilic period Palestine (see Camp 1985:234; Fontaine 1988:495; 497; Whybray 1972:183 & Cohen 1945:211).

It is noteworthy to associate with Masenya's (2004:74) conclusion about the possible redaction/editing of the poem (Prov. 31:10-31), "for the purpose of this study, it will suffice to date the redaction/compilation of the passage in line with the general dating of the editing of the whole book, in the post-exilic Persian period." She added a caveat which is instructive, "this does not necessarily entail that the material contained in this poem is exclusively post-exilic. In view of the older nature of family wisdom, on which our poem and some parts of the book focus, it is possible that we are in the present text dealing with pre-exilic material."²¹

The divisions in the book may help to make sense out of the maze of dating and authorship of Proverbs. The next section deals with the internal contours of the book of Proverbs and how that can help us understand the book better.

2.5. Division of the book of Proverbs

2.5.1. Overview of the general composition of Proverbs

Unlike Ecclesiasticus and to some extent the book of Job, the book of Proverbs clearly shows distinct lines of different compositions which have been brought together to form a book (anthology).²² Scholars are divided over how to demarcate the compositional boundaries of the content of the book of Proverbs. Despite the contending theories about how the book of Proverbs was put together, the first section (1-9) was purposely put there as a prologue for the whole book (Fox 1997:613). There is a consensus about the bridging (*inclusio*) effect of both the first and last sections (1-9; 31:10-31) of Proverb over the rest of the collections, that makes the book of Proverbs (Whybray 1994b:17). On the other hand, it is possible that chapter 10-29 which were written largely in a contrasting style (antithetic parallelism) were mirroring the anecdotes presented in chapter 1-9 which had

²¹ The date of the poem will be looked at again under the historical setting (*Sitz im Leben*) on page 144

²² Clifford (1998:42) "the book of Proverbs is an anthology of collections and appendixes, which were composed and collected from the earliest days of the monarchy (ca. 1000 BCE.) to the end of the sixth century B.C.E."

been rehashed in a casual way (Brown 1996:45). Female characterization of both the first section of the book of Proverbs (1-9) and the final chapter (31), serves as a connecting bridge that serves as an enveloping device for the background of the book of Proverbs. This gives the book an outlook of a purposefully written document (Camp 1985:191). Largely, scholars agree about the predominately female characterization of some of the sections of the book of Proverbs: The strange woman and the wise woman in 1-9; the mother of Lemuel in 31:1-9; and finally, the woman of virtue in 31:10-31 (Fontaine 1988:501).

2.5.2. Major divisions in the book of Proverbs

However, beyond the different compositional theories, there are women imagery and the *inclusio* in the beginning (chap 1-9) and the ending (chap 31:10-31) of the book. There is a growing consensus among scholars about the major divisions (or collections) that constitute the book of Proverbs. The first major collection is made up of Proverbs 1-9 (wisdom exhortations); the second major collection comprises Proverbs 10:1-15:33; 16:1-22:16 (Proverbs of Solomon); the third major collection is Proverbs 22:17-23:22 & Proverbs 24:23-34 (sayings of the wise); the fourth major collection includes Proverbs 25-29 (further wise sayings of Solomon gathered by Hezekiah's men); the fifth collection comprises Proverbs 30:1-33 (the wisdom of Agur). Some scholars have argued that the final chapter should be kept together as a unit, while others separate them into 31:1-9; 10-31 (cf. Estes 2005:220; Hill & Walton 2000:538-539; Clifford 1998:42). Goldingay (2010:607) stresses that "the complete woman in 31:10-31 is often treated as separate from the sayings of Lemuel's mother. But every other independent unit in Proverbs has its own heading, and the absence of such a heading in verse 10 suggests that this section should be seen as part of the saying of Lemuel's mother." There is yet another group of scholars who do not see the need to separate the sayings of Agur and Lemuel (Prov. 30-31) (cf. Lucas 2016:25; Walton, Mathew & Chavalas 2000:569; Masenya 2004:70).

2.5.2.1. First division of the book of Proverbs

The first collection (Prov. 1-9) is made up of a series of admonishments, which differ greatly from the rest of the book, both with respect to form and content. This section is

made up of short essays on different issues of life and exhortation to the youth or the “son.” Proverbs 1:1-7 serves as the introduction to both the whole book and the first major collection: Proverbs 1-9. Whybray (1994b:17) notes that “this editorial construction, which grounds wisdom in the fear of Yahweh, sets the tone for the whole book.” Fox (1997:613) somehow concurs with Whybray that “it seems apparent that in the extant text of Proverbs the first major section serves as a thematic introduction or preamble to the whole document. In these wisdom exhortations, the prominent themes are the ways of wisdom and folly.” Clements (2003:465) insists that “predominantly, in this section, the threat to young men posed by the unattached or loose woman is given prominence. She is perceived as a temptation and sexual threat whose activities undermine marriage and the integrity of the family.” This section is ascribed to Solomon, the son of David, the king of Israel. Solomon is associated with wisdom in the history of the Hebrews. In 1 Kings 3:7-12, Solomon requested for wisdom to rule his people and subsequently made some landmark judgements and probably authored several proverbs and wise sayings.

2.5.2.2. Second division of the book of Proverbs

The second collection (Prov. 10:1-22:16) is designated as the Proverbs of Solomon. Clifford (1998:43) opines that “this is first of the Solomonic collections of Sayings; sometimes divided into chapters 10-15 (mostly antithetic parallelism) and 16:1-22:16 (much synonymous and synthetic parallelism).” Here, the role of women in the domestic affairs is presented with great caution: Warning that a wife can be bothersome and unsettling to the peace of the home, so a wife must be chosen with great care (Clements, 2003:465). The essays are generally in the style of the ANE wisdom where the retributive principles are at work. Also, there is a comparison between the wise person and the fool. The theory of wisdom assumed that ordering one’s life according to the principles of ethics and good judgment will result in a successful outcome. However, goodness is not guaranteed. Contrarily, injustices, laziness, recklessness will eventually yield evil outcome. Whoever, wrote or edited the book of Proverbs sought to teach these elementary principles of life. That is why he or she kept on contrasting the outcome of goodness and that of wickedness in the first and second sessions of the book of Proverbs (1-9;10-15). There are always exceptional cases in every situation and general rules,

however, the ground rules must be mastered and the exceptional cases will be taken care of. Largely, Hebrew wisemen taught that, virtue is better than tomfoolery (Van Leeuwen 1992:25-36).

The book of Proverbs is replete with the concept of actions and results connection, that goodness brings prosperity and unrighteousness results in dearth. These are what is termed 'character-consequence-nexus.' This is a general principle which must not be limited to specific personal actions and their outcome in the short term. What is being advocated here is the end analysis of people's way of life and its eventual outcome or what one does correspond with what result he or she gets (Fox 1989:132-133; cf. Van Leeuwen 1992:27). There seem to be no order intended in the book from chapters 10-31 (Martin 1995:60-61; cf. Clements 1976:100), even though some scholars have made efforts to investigate clusters of proverbs (cf. Whybray 1994b; Murphy 1998b; Heim 2001:273). Heim (2001:273) "classified proverbial clusters in Proverbs 10-22:16," while Hildebrandt (1990:171-185) subsequently identified "four 'strings' of proverbs in Proverbs 10. Identification of 10:1-5 and 10:6-11 as separate 'strings' is substantial, and are bounded by *inclusios*. However, the next set of proposed 'strings' in 10:12-21 and 10:22-30 are not as convincing as the former."

2.5.2.3. Third division of the book of Proverbs

The third section of the book of Proverbs is also labelled the saying of the wise, (Prov. 22:17-24:34). This is largely a collection of wisdom like that of their ANE neighbours. Proverbs 22:17-24:22 and the teachings of the Egyptian sage Amenemope share a lot of similarities. Especially in their content and organization of the messages (Walton, Matthews & Chavalas 2000:567). However, whether we could use the suggestion that the wisdom of the Hebrews could have had the same settings in life just like that of their Egyptian counterpart, such as the palaces of kings and classroom? At least this tells us that Hebrew wisdom could have been imparted by the wisdom of other nations (Dell

2006:65). This section of the book of Proverbs has come under critical study since the discovery of the similarities between some Egyptians wisdom writings.²³

There seems to be unanimity among scholars about who depended on the other to produce their document. This is because the document of the Egyptian Amenemope is dated around 1200 to 1000 B.C.E., while the Hebrew nation, on other hand, the basic requirements of statehood was not met until eighth century B.C.E., in which case either Solomon or Hezekiah could have master-minded the writings of such wisdom literature (Cf. Dell 2006:68-69; Blenkinsopp 1997:48-103;1995b:32-34; Brueggemann 1972: ch. 3-5; 1990:117-132 & Scott 1985:262-279).

There is yet another school of thought among some scholars who argue that both Amenemope and the Hebrew sages who wrote or compiled Proverbs might have used the same source of material and not copied each other. What is more, whether this whole idea of similarity has been overemphasized, whatever the conclusion is, the jury is still out there in the circles of academia (cf. Dell 2006:66; see also, Alt 1955:16-25; Whybray 1994b: 76-89; Emerton 2001:430-465).

2.5.2.4. Fourth division of the book of Proverbs

The fourth collection comprises chapters 25-29 of the book of Proverbs. This section is unique for several reasons. However, what makes it stands out among the various collections is the attribution of this section to Solomon and the men of Hezekiah (the 7th century B.C.E). This claim resolves the issue of date somehow and the authorship of the collection. What is more, the social settings of the corpus are also determined: they were collected or written in the palace or the court of the king.

Who the 'men of Hezekiah' were, is yet to be determined. What is not certain, is how these proverbs were copied. Were they in oral form which were put together by the men of Hezekiah, or were there documents which were recopied. Since the poems in this collection encompasses the scope of morality, which gives those poems a wider range

²³Cf. Dell (2006:77), "The discovery of the Instruction of Amenemope in the early 1920s changed the face of wisdom studies with the noting of strong parallels between this text and this section of Proverbs."

beyond the boundary of educational or didactic purpose. There is no indication that this section has a school as its setting unless one could stretch the argument that the palace of king Hezekiah operated an educational institution where his so-called men did their teaching (Dell 2006:77).

There is a structural difference that can be found between chapter 25-27 and chapters 28-29. The former is devoid of any reference to Yahweh and antithetical correspondence while there are a good number of allegories, images, and caution. This makes it possible to set them aside as a distinct group. While on the other hand, the reverse is true with the latter (28-29). There is the mention of Yahweh, some few allegories and antithetical correspondence (Dell 2006:77).

2.5.2.5. Fifth division in the book of Proverbs

The fifth collection (Prov. 30) seems to have its authorship determined by the introductory verse (Prov. 30:1). King Agur has no historical connection with the Hebrew nation. Some scholars have associated him with the Massa tribe of one of the sons of Ishmael²⁴ (Cf. Dell 2006:82; Hill & Walton 2000:358-359). Some commentators have argued that if the word Massa is taken as a place, then we can assume that those names were historical figures. However, if it is taken as it is written “*ha Massa*” the massa which could be an oracle or a burden and not a geographic location (Ndogo 2014: 168), it is most likely that king Agur the son of Jakeh,²⁵ was not a Hebrew.

²⁴“The designation ‘of Massa,’ probably the north Arabian tribe mentioned in Genesis 25:14 and 1 Chronicles 1:30 as a son of Ishmael (alternatively translated ‘the oracle’). “Agur (Prov. 30) and Lemuel (Prov. 31) appear to have their origin in Massa” (Kitchen 1977:102). “Massa was situated to the east of Israel-Judah on the fringes of the Arabian desert. Agur and Lemuel are attested to in the mid-first millennium Assyrian texts. The overall period from the tenth to the sixth centuries B.C.E is a good indication of the involvement of Agur and Lemuel in the book. The earliest date at which their independent works could have been added to a scroll that contains the present Proverbs 1-29 is the seventh century B.C.E” (Kitchen 1977:102; cf. Jansen 2018:56).

²⁵ It is most probable that the word Jakeh is not a Hebrew proper noun but an Aramaic adjective which could mean precious, honour, exceptional or esteemed, this is because the word is not found in the Hebrew vocabulary but rather among the Aramaic words (Harris, Archer & Waltke 1980:1030; Koehler & Baumgartner 2000:3388-3389). Here is the literary gap for the study: the identity of Lemuel and his mother and whether they were related to king Agur.

This collection can also be divided into two main sections, from verses 1-14 and from verse 15-33. They are both characterized by their unique features. Dell (2006:83) suggests that “this section has been seen as a series of unrelated short pieces or as a dialogue between more orthodox and less orthodox positions (i.e., scepticism in 1b-4, orthodox reply in 5-6, conclusion in 7-9).”

The second section of the fifth collection is characterized by short numerical Proverbs that list elements in nature (Cf. Prov. 6:16-19). Dell (2006:84) argues that “they form a series of relatively unconnected clusters of sayings, the only uniting feature being the numerical aspect. They do not appear to be in any order, and examples from natural phenomena are intermingled with examples of human behaviour.

2.5.2.6. Sixth division of the book of Proverbs

The sixth and the final collection is also attributed to the mother of king Lemuel. Here we are also faced with yet another possible foreign composition incorporated into the collection of Proverbs. This makes verses 1-9 constitute advice to king Lemuel by the mother and verses 10-31 as an acrostic²⁶ poem about an exceptional wife. Some scholars have argued that this section should be seen as part of the first half of the collection (See Waltke 2005:501; cf. Koptak 2003:672; see also Kitchen 2006:710 and Wendland 2006:1251). That gives us the possible author to be the mother of king Lemuel, who has no established historical connection with the Hebrew nation.

While some scholars on the other hand, consider this section as an independent unit (cf. Whybray 1972:183; Cohen 1945:211; Fontaine 1988:497), it is most probable that the poem is a foreign composition which was added to the collection which made the book of Proverbs. It is also curious that the only connection to the cult was the passing statement of her fear of Yahweh, which is not even attested by

²⁶Szlos (2000:98) “an alphabetic acrostic poem: Each verse starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the verses are organized in alphabetical order” see “acrostic poems in, e.g., Lam 3 and in Ps 25; 119.”

LXX (Hawkins 1996:12; Longman III 2006:29). There is also the suggestion by some scholars that the poem forms an *inclusio* with the first collection of the book of Proverbs (1-9) (Whybray 1994b:17).

It is instructive to note that there is a discrepancy in the arrangement of the book in both the Masoretic text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX). The difference starts from 24:23 onwards. The two documents are similar from chapter 1-24:22, the arrangement from this section onwards differ (Ndogo 2014:172; see also Lichtenstein 1982:202; cf. Koptak 2003: 674). The LXX is the oldest available manuscript, because it is dated around 200 B.C.E. and the MT is dated around 1000 C.E (Longman III 2006:28). This does not refer to the date of the Hebrew text. However, it could suggest that the MT could have been the edited copy for a certain theological purpose. Here again, this does not mean that the Hebrew text is an edited copy of the LXX, this is in reference to the MT.

The MT and LXX arrangement of the book of Proverbs

MT	LXX
"24: 23-34 (Further Sayings of the Wise)"	"30:1-14 (Agur)"
"25:1-29: 27 (Hezekiah's Men)"	"24:23-34 (Further Sayings of the Wise)"
"30:1-14 (Agur)"	"30:15-33 (Numerical Parallelisms)"
"30:15-33 (Numerical Parallelisms)"	"31:1-9 (Lemuel's Mother)"
"31:1-9 (Lemuel's Mother)"	"25:1-29:27 (Hezekiah's Men)"
"31:10-31 (Poem to the Noble Wife)"	"31:10-31 (Poem to the Noble Wife)"

Suggested outline of the book of Proverbs

“Chapter 1-9 “	“Wisdom Admonishment”
“Chapter 10:1-22:16”	“Proverbs of Solomon”
“Chapter 22:17-24:34”	“Sayings of the Wise”
“Chapter 25-29”	“Proverbs of Solomon gathered by Hezekiah’s men”
“Chapter 30- “	“Sayings of Agur”
“Chapter 31-“	“Sayings of Lemuel’s Mother”

It begs the question to ask why did the editor or redactor of MT decide to bring the poem of Lemuel’s mother just before the poem of the virtuous woman in verse 1-9;10-31? Is it possible that the successive poems of women playing the central role was intended to achieve a certain theological end? Or is it a case of correcting an error which might have occurred in the earlier edition of the same document? A careful examination of the last two chapters of MT suggest that the editor might have purposely put the two chapters that are of foreign origin together as an appendix to the collections and by so doing correcting the disorderly arrangement of the book from chapter 24:23-34 to 31:31 in the LXX (cf. Fox 2009:849). Whatever the motive for this arrangement, it makes a lot more organizational sense than that of the LXX. What is more, at least it has an attribution of an author at the beginning of the chapter instead of being without a name being given as its author. This issue of rearrangement will be dealt with in detail in chapter four under *paratext*.

2.6. Wisdom motifs of the book of Proverbs

Wisdom is like an evasive animal and not within the reach of most people. Everyone tries to describe it, but realize at the end that it has escaped them and they are unable to comprehend its form. Some have described it as human-centred, global, it transcends

time and eudemonistic.²⁷ However, each time they attempt to describe it they find out that they need more information to be able to completely comprehend it (Crenshaw 1985:369). Wisdom is about how to find your way in a maze of life independently or as an organization (Bartholomew 2016:15). Among others the following constitutes the wisdom motifs in this section: the personification of wisdom or hypostasis, wisdom and creation, wisdom and law.

2.6.1. Personification of wisdom or hypostasis

Lucas (2016:37:38) defines personification as “the personalizing of impersonal things, inanimate objects or abstract concepts.” This is common in the wisdom literature in the Ancient Near East. In Proverbs, wisdom is made to behave like a human being, a woman, calling the youth to adhere to reason and ethical behaviour. However, some scholars have argued for ‘hypostasis’ instead of personification of wisdom, using Proverbs 8:22-36. Lucas (2016:37,38; cf. Ringgren 1947:104) contends that “hypostasis is a concrete being, self-existent being beside God in Proverbs 8:22-31.” However, how this concept came by is not explained; what is more, in Proverbs 1:20-33; 8:1-21; 9:1-6, wisdom is in the form of personification or allegory, while in 8:22-31 it is true hypostasis of Yahweh’s attribute of wisdom.

Personified wisdom, wisdom as a personification of a woman is common in the book of Proverbs. How did wisdom end up as a woman in Proverbs? Kayatz (1966:22) insists that “the Egyptian goddess of truth and justice (*Ma’at*) could be the source of female personification of wisdom in Proverbs.” Fox (1995:37-48) is not impressed with Kayatz’s argument about *Ma’at* being the prototype of personified wisdom in Proverbs. He insists that “*Ma’at* was not popular even in Egypt, all the attributes that have been parallel with personified wisdom was also shared by all the other gods and kings of the ANE. What is more, that, *Ma’at* is not known to have made any speech as the case is with personified wisdom in Proverbs 8.” Kayatz (1966:22) agrees that “1:20-33 wisdom speaks more like

²⁷“It is a theory that posits that the highest ethical goal is happiness and personal well-being” (eudaemonism, Jansen 2018:29).

a Hebrew prophet instead of a goddess which made him describe these verses as poetic personification.”

Some scholars (cf. Lucas 2016:38; Clifford 1999:23-28; Whybray 1965:83-87 & Albright1955:1-15) have also suggested “the goddess Isis and other goddesses in the ANE as the source of the concept of personified wisdom in the book of Proverbs.” Knox (1937:230-237) maintains that Isis became so popular in the ANE to the extent that Proverbs 8 might have been written as a response to the ever-popular Isis’s worship. He based his argument on the similarities between the two. Lucas (2016:38) is not convinced about the influence of Isis on the concept of personification of wisdom.

Finally, Camp (1985:23-28; see also Sinnott 2005; Lucas 2016:39) contends that “the embodiment of wisdom was simply a literary creation.” Apple (2011:179; cf. Sinnott 2005) stresses that “this device was fashioned to give human form and its related images to the concept. The personification of wisdom became essential, after the destruction of Jerusalem and during the exile in Babylon.” What is more, “the feminine gender of the word might have contributed to this literary creation.”

2.6.2. Wisdom and creation

Longman III (2006:79-80) commenting on Proverbs 3:19-20 and 8:22-31, opines that “God created the world through wisdom. Personified wisdom as a means of creation. What is not clear, is whether the personified wisdom was referring to hypostasis: Wisdom as a self-existent being. He (Longman III 2006) contends that “if God created the world by means of wisdom, then human beings need wisdom to be able to live successfully.”

There are two passages in the book of Proverbs that refers to wisdom with creation (Prov. 3:19-20; 8:22-31;) Van Leeuwen (2007:78) argues that “the use of ‘founded’ ‘established’ and understanding or skill in Proverbs 3:19-20 imply the use of the metaphor of house-building with reference to creation. The role that wisdom played in creation is not clear. There is also doubt about whether wisdom here is reference to the personification of God or a certain agent of creation. Since wisdom was part of creation, that is why getting acquaintance with her will make one live life well.”

Von Rad (1972:151), in his attempt to identify a certain structure in the two texts of creation and wisdom, extended both texts to include: 3:13-18 & 3:21-26; 8:1-21 & 8:32-36. In the extended text he found a three-part structure which are: “An admiration of wisdom, the part wisdom played in creation and a call to accept wisdom.”

Von Rad’s structure of the two passages of wisdom and creation

“In admiration of wisdom”	8:1-21	3:13-18
“The part wisdom played in creation”	8:22-31	3:19-20
“A call to accept wisdom”	8:32:36	3:21-26

2.6.3. Law and wisdom

There are a lot of networks between wisdom and law. Both play an influential role in the life of a human being (cf. Longman III 2006 :80). Proverbs 10:1 state that “a wise son makes a father glad and a foolish son is the sorrow of his mother.” This is a direct reflection of Exodus 20:12. There is a direct connection between wisdom’s requirement in Proverbs and the commandments in Exodus. This is expressed in Proverbs 10:8 and 19:20, “the wise in heart will receive commands but a prating fool will fall.” “Listen to counsel and receive instruction, that you may be wise in your latter days.”

The fifth commandment, (Ex 20:21) “Honour your father and mother, that your days may be long upon the land the Lord your God is giving you.” corresponds with Proverbs 1:8; 4:1.10;10:1;13:1. While the sixth commandment, “do not murder” (Ex 20:13) corresponds with 1:10-12. 6:17. The seventh commandment (Ex 20:14) “Do not commit adultery” corresponds with Proverbs 2:16-19; 5; 6:20-35; 7. The eighth commandment (Ex 20:15) “Do not steal” corresponds with Proverbs 1:13-14; 11:1; the ninth (Ex 20:15) “Do not bear false witness” corresponds with Proverbs 3:30; 6:18,19; 10:18; 12:17,19. The tenth

commandment, (Ex 20:16) “You shall not covet your neighbour” corresponds with Proverbs 6:18. Even though wisdom and law are of a different *genre*, however, they are speaking with the same voice. Nevertheless, a distinction must be made between social etiquettes and the law. The law of the land is primarily the jurisprudence or a code of behaviour that is tolerable by the faith society. Therefore, a mere acquaintance of the legal regime is not enough to understand or meet the obligations of the etiquettes of the Hebrews. The Hebrews were expected to demonstrate much more than simply knowing the law as faith community (Wenham 2000:78-79; cf. Longman III 2006: 81).

2.7. Portrait of the woman of valour: A true reflection of Hebrew culture

Lang (2004:189) postulates that there are two schools of thought when it comes to the interpretation of the nature of the woman in the poem: “the symbolic and the realistic historic figure.”

2.7.1. Symbolic view of the woman of valour

The first view contends that the text (Prov. 31:10-31) will be better understood when analysed alongside with chapters 1-9, thereby looking at the two iconic women figures: Lady wisdom and the virtuous woman side by side. The idea of wisdom incarnating in human form needed a superhuman personality to make that possible. This personality needed to be partially extraordinary and partly human in nature, creating resemblance of imperial women during the Persian empire (Lang 2004:189). Among the proponents of the symbolic figure view is Clements (2003:465-466) who further postulates that “there has been a negative image of womanhood so far in the book of Proverbs especially in 1-9, about unattached or loose woman. The latter is seen as temptation and a sexual threat to both the married and unmarried.” The place of a woman in the family setting is described with extra care in Proverbs 10:1-22:16 knowing that there is the possibility of a discordant wife whose actions and inactions can mar the beauty and the harmony of the marriage union. Therefore, prospective grooms should not just marry any woman, but they should marry women who will work tirelessly to create harmony and peace (Prov. 31:14-16, 22, 24, 27).

2.7.2. Composite picture of all that is good in womanhood

The second view, is the composite picture of all that is good in womanhood, here the proponents read the poem against the background of the day-to-day requirements of wisdom or sapiential²⁸ teaching as found in Proverbs 10:1-31:9. The poem was written to assist the youth to manage the expectations of life with fortitude (Lawrence & Aguilar 2004:5). Lang (2004:189) goes ahead to compare the text with Xenophon's *Oeconomics*²⁹ (ca. 430-356B.C.E.). The woman in the text seems to be autonomous from the previous poem, an opposite of Proverbs 31:1-9. The woman of worth defined in Proverbs 31:10-31 is undoubtedly a lady of value, but her value is professional, practical and economical. She is a self-motivated accomplished woman. She can combine both the domestic duties and her businesses; her home has domestics workers and beauty. From all indications she is from the upper class of the society where it was not unusual for a woman to superintend over their affairs. She has a husband who has the luxury of sitting at the city gate all day. She has children who we are not told anything about and none of these have names. This woman must definitely be different from the queen mother of the previous poem of Proverbs 31: 1-9 (Apple 2011:178).

The poem is arranged in a consecutive order of the *alef-beth* (Hebrew Alphabet) giving the impression that it is an exhaustively treated subject of the virtuous woman. However, the picture created is more of a patchwork of different aspects of her life and activities that has been brought together to make this image of her. This image was created without any order or pattern, just a collection of different pieces of her life put together. It looks disorganized at first but a closer look reveals an admirable woman when all the pieces come together into a unified picture of a woman (Yoder 2003:427). Obviously, the image of the woman was created to give an impression of an excellent wife. She was presented with characteristics of an exceptional wife: dependability, ingenuity, far-sightedness,

²⁸“Sapiential is an adjective from the Latin word ‘Sapere’ that means ‘to be wise’ ” (Waltke & Yu 2007: 897).

²⁹ “The Greek author Xenophon of Athens (ca 430-356) styled his *Oeconomicus* as a dialogue with Socrates as the main speaker and the description of wife’s domestic duties and her contribution to the management of the estate have never been considered as an ancient source that might help us understand the only biblical text dealing with the same subject in the pericope (Prov. 31:10-31)”

hardworking, kindness, entrepreneurial skills, and the fear of Yahweh³⁰ (Hawkins 1996:12).

The poem used symbols and images of a woman or a female to paint a picture of the purpose and the strength of wisdom. This idea was arrived at by looking closely at the trends of the Talmud, the symbols and images of Proverbs of a good woman who had her thinking cap well positioned on her shoulders. As against a perverted woman whose conduct always left much to be desired. Most probably this was a didactic tool during the reign of Hezekiah. Proverbs 31 is a catalogue of elementary lessons on good behaviour, with verses 10-31 being the epilogue of the characteristics and values that set a noble woman apart (Gutstein 1999:36).

Yoder (2003:432) further states that “there is more to the virtuous wife than an alleged dearth of woman of substance, the question is parallel by the phrase her purchase price is more than carols (31:10b) this wife is not only difficult to find, it seems she is also expensive to attain. She has a purchasing price and it is considerable. As far as the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is ascribed in terms of a price; it may be argued that she is a typical Persian-period bride.”

2.7.3. Real flesh and blood woman

There are some scholars whose commentary assumes that the main character in the poem could be a flesh and blood historic figure. Harrison (2005:430; see also Szlos 2000:97-103) states that “the poem re-enacts the time-tested practice of Hebrew matriarch in supervising closely the affairs of her entire household. This demands energy, foresight, and careful planning, so that nobody for whom she is responsible will be hungry or lack clothing. She does not consider these duties to be demeaning but rather rejoices in them as a fulfilment of her responsibilities to her family and to society in general.” Dentan (1971:319) states that this poem presents the Hebrew wife as a responsible head of the household (11:16, 22; 12:4; 18:22; 21:9,19) she provides for food and clothing (vv. 13-15,19, 21-22) purchase property, engages in trade and exercise charity. So here the

³⁰ The Septuagint does not have this word, could this mean that the poem was adapted to suit Hebrew culture? (cf. Longman III, 2006:29; Wolters 1984:157).

virtuous woman is presented as a composite of all that is good in the Hebrew wife (cf. Claassens 2016:11).

To answer the question whether the portrait of the woman of valour³¹ (*Ishak Chahil*) in the poem is a true image of the Hebrew culture or it was copied from another culture? If the Hebrew culture is patriarchal in its orientation, then this image of an independent and assertive woman of the poem, and for that matter, the general image of women in Proverbs, cannot be a true reflection of a said culture. Whybray (1994a:161; cf. Masenya 2004: 81) opines that “the image of women in 1-9 and 31 are more active and dominant as compared to the rest of the Old Testament. The husband of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 plays a minor role as compared to the wife. It is the wife who promotes the wealth and the prestige of the family. Not only catering for the needs of the husband, children, and servants, but also maintaining a successful cottage industry even buying a field and planting vineyard.” Some commentators have observed that, the spouse’s place and status among the leaders of the town’s entrance (v. 23) shrink in importance in comparison with the woman’s avalanche of activities both in her domestic duties and her cottage industry (McCreesh 1985:17; see also Masenya 2004:81).

2.7.4. Who then was the virtuous woman?

So, who was the virtuous woman in the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31? It is worthy of note that the activities of the women figure in the book of Proverbs are not limited to the domestic sphere. All the female images operate both in the domestic and in the public arena as far as the book of Proverbs is concerned (cf. Meyers 1991:47-49; Whybray 1994a:161). There is no record of any Hebrew woman, in the long history of the nation, who exercised this kind of character, not Sarah, Rebekah, Abigail or the Shunamite woman. Nor Miriam, Deborah, Jezebel, or Hagar (Bellis 2007:1-305). In the case of Ruth where all the women of Bethlehem described her as a virtuous woman (Ruth 3:11), did not have her husband always at the city gate, he was an active and a successful farmer. This has led some scholars to conclude that the poem is a personification of wisdom.

³¹Translated variously as "the excellent wife" (Lichtenstein 1982:202-211), the "valiant woman" (Wolters 1988:446-457), "the worthy wife" and "a woman of strength" (Murphy 1990:27), both "the good wife" and "a virtuous woman" (Crenshaw 1992: 517,513), and a marriageable maiden (Crook 1954:137-140).

McCreesh (1985:25-26) as a mouth piece of those who advocate for personification in the portrayal of the woman of valour, states that “Proverbs 31:10-31 draws together the major themes, motifs, and ideas of the book in a final, summarization statement about wisdom under the image of an industrious, resourceful, and selfless wife. It is the final piece in a symbolic framework that unifies the whole book, including the individual sayings. In turn, the symbolic framework presents a coherent statement about the nature of wisdom.”

The poem does not reflect the state and status of women in the Hebrew culture. It cannot be said that since she did not have a name, it could mean that she is a personification of wisdom. There were few women mentioned or referred to in the Old Testament.³² It is most probable that this image of an active and assertive woman reflects the culture of king Lemuel and his mother who could be members of the Massa tribe. Or a descendant of the matriarch Hagar, the mother of Ishmael and the concubine of Abraham. However, whether the poem reflects the Hebrew culture or not is irrelevant, if the Hebrews accepted the portrait as a tribute to motherhood, and acknowledged it as a reflection of the best of their womanhood, then we have no reason to deny them that right. According to the custom of the Hebrews, the *Ishak Chahil* (Prov. 31:10-31) is part of the eve of the Sabbath day liturgy. This tradition is believed to be in honour of the Hebrew womanhood (Apple 2011:180; see also, Levin 1985/86:339-347). This recognition makes the woman in the poem an icon or a model of what a Hebrew woman must be or could be. The worthy woman in the text might be a literary creation of a sage whose aim could be a didactic tool to help shape the image and personality of the women-folk among the Hebrew people, thereby creating a prosperous and harmonious society, taking cognizance of their history (cf. Isa 3:13-15;16-23; 58:3-7; Amos 4:1, 2; 6:1, 4-7). A more detailed analysis of the perception of the virtuous woman among the Hebrews is done in chapter four of this thesis (p.148).

³² Meyers (2011:63-64) notes that there are only 135 women whose names were mentioned or referred to in the Old Testament. There were those who were not named, however, all together they do not account for more than ten percent of that of the males who were named in the Old Testament.

2.8. Wisdom literature in the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) culture.

2.8.1. Israel in the neighbourhood of the Ancient Near East

The Hebrew nation among its neighbours (ANE) was a small country according to the Hebrew Bible's own account, among other smaller and bigger nations some of whom were related, in the latter part of 2nd and the 1st millennium B.C.E. To the north was the Aramaean city states around the tenth and eighth centuries. There were great nations like Egypt and New-Assyria (8th and 7th centuries), New-Babylon (late half of the 7th and early 6th centuries), Persia (539-333 B.C.E) and many other nations - great and small. All these nations had their own literature and customs. They were also related in trade, diplomacy, and military cooperation (Clifford 1998:23).

There is no aspect of the Hebrew culture that can be said to be unique to itself in comparison to its neighbours, starting with Egypt as the cradle of the Hebrew nation to Neo-Assyria and Neo-Babylonia, which subjugated and deported them into exile at some point in their history.

2.8.2. Internationalisation of wisdom

The internationalisation of wisdom in the ANE is well attested, and most scholars have come to accept that wisdom in the Hebrew nation was not an isolated occurrence. There are enough sources to prove that there was wisdom in Mesopotamia,³³ Egypt³⁴ Babylonia, Sumeria³⁵ and recently Greece (Walton, Mathews & Chavalas 2000:560-570 also see Brown 1981:170-171; Longman III 2006:42-56). Brown (1981:170-171) posits that the Hebrew book of Proverbs contains the most compelling literary parallels³⁶

³³ "Ugaritic epics of Baal and Anath and of Ahiqat (c1400 B.C.E.)" (Walton, Mathews & Chavalas 2000:560).

³⁴ "The teaching of Ptah-Hotep (c 2500 B.C.E.), the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant (c 2000 B.C.E.), the Instruction of Amenemope (c 1200B.C) and the Instruction of Ankhsheshonqy (c 200 B.C.E.)" (Walton, Mathews & Chavalas 2000:560).

³⁵ Longman III (2006:48) opine that the Sumerian wisdom collection can be dated as far as the early Dynastic III period -2600-2550 B.C.E.

³⁶ Proverbs 1:12 describes the grave as a mouth that swallows its victims, and this same imagery is echoed in the epic of Baal and Anath, where the god death, Mot, is said to devour its prey, "eating them with both hands" Proverbs 6:23-29 and 7:24-27 both admonish the wise son to conquer his lust for women who will bring him to disaster in much the same way that Ptah-Hotep cautions that one should stay away from the

between the Old Testament and any Ancient Near Eastern text: That between Proverbs 22:17-24:22 and the teaching of Amen-em-ope of the seventh century B.C.E. or earlier in which the Hebrew can be seen as the borrower both by its blurring of ideas and its use of Aramaic *hapax legomena*.³⁷ Walton, Matthews & Chavalas (2000:560; cf. Longman III 2006:50) postulate that the occurrence of wisdom in Assyria from the eighth century, usually called the words of Ahiqar (c 700 B.C.E.), suggest that most of the sages were attached to the palace bureaucracy, perhaps members of the scribal class. West (1974:65-71) states that the poems of Theognis of Megara which were addressed to his friend Kyrnos, have close parallels in the Hebrew Proverbs. He dates “the poems between 630-600 B.C.E., before the fall of the old oligarchy in Megara and the rise of the new.” Here is yet another parallel in the wisdom between the Hebrew Scripture and this time with Greece.

Below are the parallels between Proverbs and the poem of Theognis (630-600 B.C.E.)

	Proverbs		Theognis
14:20	“The poor is disliked even by his neighbour, but the rich have many friends.”	621	“Everybody honours a rich man and dishonours a poor man.”
19:4	“Wealth adds many friends, but a poor man is deserted even by his friends.”		
11:11	“By the blessing of the upright, a city is exalted, but	43	“Good men, O Cyrnus, never destroyed a city.”

women of the house and keep your mind on business. Proverbs 16:8 and 21:9 provides examples of the “better than” saying that is also found in the instruction of Ankhsheshongy, “Better to dwell in your own house than in someone else’s mansion,” and in the instruction of Amenemope, “Better is a single loaf and a happy heart than all the riches in the world and sorrow.” Proverbs 6:16-19: “There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him,” is also used by Ahiqar, “two kinds of people are a delight, a third pleases Shamash” Walton, Matthew & Chavalas (2000:560).

³⁷ Longman III (2006:43) dates the Egyptian wisdom which is term instruction as early as the Old Kingdom 2715-2170 B.C.E., down to the Demotic period - seventh century B.C.E., and after.

	it is overthrown by the mouth of wicked.”		
15:6 13:11; 21:5	<p>“Wealth gained by dishonesty will be diminished, but he who gather by labour will increase</p> <p>The plan of the diligent leads surely to plenty, but those of everyone who is hasty surely to poverty.”</p>	752 cf.197ff	<p>“(In) house of the righteous is much treasure</p> <p>Poverty comes neither into the Agora or the court.”</p>
10:15;13: 8; 18:11	<p>“The rich man’s wealth is his strong city; the destruction of the poor is their poverty; the ransom of a man’s life is riches, but the poor does not hear rebuke; the rich man’s wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his own esteem.”</p>	268; 179	<p>“The tongue of the poor is tied, but a rich man’s wealth is his strong city; the poverty of the poor is their ruin.”</p>
14:7-8	<p>“Go from the presence of a foolish man, when you do not perceive in him the lips of knowledge.</p> <p>The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way but the folly of fools is deceit.”</p>	31-32	<p>“Do not converse with evil men, but always hold fast to good men; above all when taking counsel about a weighty matter either business or politics.”</p>

		69-72	
9:8-9	<p>“Do not reprove a scoffer, lest he hate you; Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you.”</p> <p>“Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a just man and he will increase in learning.”</p>	112	<p>“Only the good man is practical enough to remember the benefits you give him.”</p>
23:33	<p>“Your eye will see strange things and your heart will utter perverse things.”</p>	481	<p>“The wise man must be aware of wine; through whose influence he speaks inappropriately.”</p>
23:21	<p>“For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags.”</p>	920-21	<p>“The one who pleases his belly dissipates his money.”</p>
11:17; 11:25	<p>“The merciful man does good for his own soul, but he who is cruel troubles his own flesh;</p> <p>The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself.”</p>	573	<p>“Do well and you will fare well.”</p>

6:1; 1:15; 17:18; 20:16; 27:27	“He who is surety for a stranger will suffer for it, but one who hates being surety is secure.”	284	“But it is essential to avoid the unlimited obligation of pledge.”
27:1	“Do not boast about morrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”	159-160	“Never, o Cynrus, speak a bold word; for no man knows what the night and the morrow will bring to him.”
19:21	“Many are the plans in the mind of a man; but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.” ³⁸	141-142	“We men think vain thoughts, knowing nothing; the gods accomplish all things by their will.”
16:18	“Pride goes before a fall, and a haughty spirit before destruction.”	151-152	“The gods first provide hybris for the evil man whose place he is about to destroy.”

Brown (1981:175) quoted Crenshaw’s phrase correctly “when he spoke of the ‘internationalisation of wisdom’ and the ‘high level of continuity’ among Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Hebrew wisdom texts, (to which we can now add Greek). What class of carriers can explain those international contacts?” Brown (1981:169-191) further postulates that “the flow of commerce with the gold trade might have served as the source of decimation of the wise sayings in the Ancient Near East. However, the tradition of sages expounding the wise sayings in the ancient cultures is no longer in doubt in the Ancient Near East.” Walton, Matthew & Chavalas (2000:560) states that “the manner

³⁸ Cf. Amen-em-opet xviii (19.16): "One thing are the words which men say, another is that which the god does" (ANET, 423b).

employed in such wisdom pieces as the teaching of Ptah-Hotep and the Instruction of Amenemope suggests that there were wisdom schools in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.” The schools in Mesopotamia were involved in more than dealing with wisdom in the true sense of the word. They were also healers, diviners, astronomers, and others. Beaulieu (2007:3) posits that “wisdom literature (Mesopotamian context) is such a vast and inclusive notion that scholars have always experienced great difficulties in clearly defining its boundaries. Wisdom in Mesopotamian literature was defined by the identification of its correspondence in the Hebrew wisdom literature.”

Hebrew wisdom is set in the context of larger Ancient Near Eastern wisdom. There are similarities and differences, whether the Hebrew nation copied from their neighbours or vice versa, or they had common sources they copied from. It is evident that common themes occurred in the minds of the sages of the time and it further gives credence to the internationalisation of wisdom in the Ancient Near East. The Hebrew Scriptures attest to the existence of wisdom in the ANE and in Egypt in 1 Kings 4:29-30 when it compared the wisdom of Solomon with those in Egypt and other regions.

The next section concerns itself with whether the poem (Prov. 31:10-31) and Proverbs in general were the product of an androcentric society and how women were seen in those contexts.

2.9. Androcentric orientation of Hebrew society

2.9.1. Introduction

The question is: Is the Hebrew nation exceptionally androcentric? The function and the position of females in the Hebrew culture were constrained to being the offspring of their fathers, the spouse of their significant other and the mom of their children. The woman was not likely to play any conspicuous part in the life of the nation or in the public, beside her customary responsibilities. The few instances where a female occupied a vital part in the activities of the nation was either in exile as in the case of Miriam during the exodus, Esther in the Persian exile or when the nation was under the Judges which was also a

time of trouble when the independence from other nations was not guaranteed (Lockyer 1967:13,17).

It is therefore not surprising that the term used in describing the woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 (אִשָּׁת חַיִל) could only be found in the book of Ruth where it was used to describe a Moabite widow who had just moved to the territory of the Hebrew nation with her mother-in-law Naomi. It is not wholly true to describe the Hebrew culture as a purely man's world. To some extent the ancient world was androcentric, but the Hebrew woman had some degree of respect and recognition which was not usually known among the Ancient Near Eastern cultures. This status came because of the illumination Yahweh gave Moses about the role and place of women in their community. This enlightenment gave women the latitude to oversee the affairs of the home with some degree of freedom, understanding and dignity uncommon among the cultures of the east. The Hebrew woman was never held as a bond or a servant during her responsibilities. However, she went about her different duties with a lot of grace and poise as a member of the covenant community (Lockyer 1967:13,17).

It will do us no good to deny that the Hebrew family system was organized with the father as the head. Males also superintended the societal structures. Men also usually led in the religious and administrative systems almost to the exclusion of women. This makes their recorded history which was written from the stand point of men almost one sided. The roles and appearance of women in their scripture were usually presented from the perspective of male authors and editors. However, this does not mean that women were repressed, dehumanized, or marginalized in their description in the biblical account. What it means is that they were not heard of directly in the scriptures by their own voice but through the voice and eyes of males to advance the aims of males (Bird 1992:9474).

The Hebrew scripture does not produce one picture of their females throughout their long history. A culture that has lasted for thousands of years and through various circumstances and standpoints yielded a mixture of portraits whose details deserves attention. In this vein, a single image of womanhood cannot be deduced from their earliest settlers in the iron age, the spouse of a rich businessman or a wife of a large plantation

owner in either Jerusalem or Samaria, the daughter of a poor 8th century farm worker, the immigrant spouse of a returned exile, the female offspring of a clergy, a female monarch, royal maids, widow without an offspring or a female sex worker. Neither can we also expect a single image from their literary works, proverbs, laws, or messages delivered by their seers (Bird 1992:9474).

However, the Hebrew woman over the years had almost the same set of expectations placed on them by their culture and their livelihoods were ruled by these requirements. These demands were born out of the need for them to maintain the household and out of that bear and nurture children to continue the family's lineage. This is because in the Hebrew culture, the family is the primary unit of the society and not the individual. This basic unit of the society is also the basis of their economy and worship. Making the role of the mother an enviable status for every woman. Out of this basic requirement of every woman of Israel, with its requirement of time and talents emanates their ultimate personal and communal recompense. The prize they pay for being excluded from public life outside the family (Bird 1992:9475).

The Hebrew culture cannot be described as androcentric, if the definition of androcentrism is male centeredness. The society had two spheres, the public and domestic, while the males were operating in public the women were also expected to operate from the domestic. The women had almost the same say as the men especially when it pertains to the domestic sphere. Especially when it was the family unit that served as the basic unit for both their economy and religious practices. However, this family unit was headed by the father and not the mother of the home. Just like all cultures ancient and modern, there are gender related roles especially in the family set up which when performed complements each other, husband, and wife. The Hebrew society cannot be said to be exceptionally androcentric just because women had to operate from the private or domestic sphere, while the men plied their trade in the public sphere. This could be described as specialization or division of labour in today's economic terms.

2.9.2. Gender roles

The issue of patriarchy or androcentric bias of the Hebrew Bible is a well-published allegation. But if men and women are of different biological and physiological orientation, gender related roles cannot be eliminated. Men and women are equal but different and are meant to play complementary roles to enhance the well-being and continuity of humanity. The best and the natural environment of a lactating mother is with her infant child and in a safe and secured place like home. Anything short of this, is nothing, but a crisis for both the mother and the infant child. What is more, by the very nature of women, they can conceive and carry pregnancy for nine months. This makes them better suited as care givers when the foetus becomes an infant after delivery. There is nothing demeaning, dehumanizing or marginalization to be entrusted with the role of preparing the next generation and to make this possible, having their vocation partly domestic (Harrison 2005:430).

The Hebrew wife was the fulcrum around which the activities of the family revolved especially those of nurture and worship. This made the teachers of the law describe the wife as “his house” when they meant to say “his wife” (a man’s wife) (Rosen 1998:19).

Sackey (2000:33) opines that “the phenomenon of menstruation, with its accompanying concepts of impurity and taboos, is pervasive in varying degrees through-out all cultures of humankind. It is also one of the distinctive observable facts in gender differentiation. In Hebrew culture, the concept of menstruation transcends an ‘apparently ordinary biological event’ or a criterion for gender distinction. More importantly, it is used particularly for explaining the spatial male/public and female /private domains. Menstruation impurity is the focal point for the exclusion of women from the sacred in Jewish religion.”

It must be mentioned that the Old Testament was written from the perspective of a cultic relationship with a deity namely, Yahweh. In this way, its purpose was not to record history, but how the nation related with her God. This could explain the limited appearance of women (135) who were named in the Old Testament (Meyers 2011:63-64). However, a close look at the few women who graced the sacred records did not show any sign of

marginalization or inferiority to their male counterparts. Sarah (Gen 12-21), the first matriarch had the same say as her husband Abraham in almost every situation. Neither were Rebekah (Gen 24-27), nor Rachel and Leah (Gen 29-35) or Ruth (Ruth 4) mere slaves or chattels in their homes, they had an equal say as their husbands in every aspect of their lives. Proverbs 31:10-31 portrays a woman who is both active in the domestic and public spheres, she literally, does everything and there is silence about the husband. How can anyone describe such a society as patriarchal or androcentric? However, there are those who argue that almost all the women who appeared in the major narratives of the Old Testament were special women whose lives cannot be used as a yardstick for all classes of women in the Hebrew nation or any other culture for that matter (Meyers 2011:64). It must be said directly that most of the gender related roles are biological in nature and were dictated by nature, by the processes that determine whether a foetus would be male or female. However, since the Hebrew nation was in the neighbourhood of the ANE, perhaps we can glean some insights about women and how they fared in those days.

2.10. Role and status of women in the ANE

2.10.1. Introduction

Crawford (2014:10-13) opines that “records were gathered on women’s activities south of Mesopotamia, during the period from the third to the early second millennium, on women from the higher and lower echelons of society. The women among others, were queens, priestesses, doctors, prostitutes, wet nurses’, midwives, singers, weavers, tanners’, sellers, farm hands and dancers.” From the beginning of recorded history gender related roles have been known among different cultures and societies. Which also created a public and private divide of the sexes, placing women in the private or domestic while men were engaged in a public sphere of society. This arrangement made marriage and child bearing the ultimate attainment of almost every woman in most ancient cultures including the Hebrews (Blenkinsopp 2001:175).

The plight of widows, divorcees and women who were never married in such cultures where marriage, child bearing, nurture and general house management were the natural

vocations of women was dire. These women were without their natural protection: Husbands. There were few options left for such women to survive the harsh reality of life without male protection and support. They had the option of returning to their parents' home if they were welcomed, or become prostitutes, practice witchcraft (as in the case of the Witch of En Dor in I Sam 28) or divinatory consultancy as the case of the wise women of Tekoa and Abel Beth-maacah (2 Sam 14:1-20; 20:14-22) (Blenkinsopp 2001:175).

2.10.2. Marriage

Marriage was the peak of almost every woman's life experience among the people of the Ancient Near East, it was so important that the gods were even known to be contracting marriages among themselves. Among the cultures of the Mesopotamian civilization (especially among the Sumerians), marriage was supposed to be contracted among adults and not infants and as a result they looked down on child marriage. The age for marriage was any time after puberty, especially four to five years was seen as an ideal age for marriage. Ordinarily, marriage was supposed to be an exclusive relationship between the couple. Marriage was contracted with the permission and active involvement of the parents of would be couple especially the father of the bride. In the absence of the father, either the mother or the elder brother could step in and act in place of the father. Except on special situations the marriage contract is done verbally, however, where there are more than one wife involved, the roles and the inheritance and other related matters were written down for future reference (Harris 1992:9468; Stol 2016:60).

The processes leading to marriage were many and varied among the people of the Mesopotamian civilization. There was the preparation, betrothal, anointing, breaking the contract, cohabitation, the wedding, and intercourse. These are but just a few of the various arrangement and steps one must take to marry his wife. The preparation stage was concerned with consulting the oracles about the advisability or otherwise of the intended marriage. They used divination especially about the entrails of animals to decipher the future of the marriage. It was upon a favourable outcome of such a consultation that a prospective couple could continue their intended contract. In fact, this was their way of life to inquire about the future before embarking on any important

business. Beside divination, the Babylonians also had a way of determining a person's behaviour by a set of tell tales of the physical features of the intended spouse (Stol 2016:62-65).

Between the betrothal and the marriage, could be many years since betrothal could even be initiated at birth of the would-be bride. There were several processes of betrothal from mere verbal request among family members to anointing of the would-be bride to libation and bathing among others. Sometimes the Assyrians do the veiling of the prospective bride. This is not marriage but promissory or declaration of intent, however, this can be broken if the would-be-couple do not find their prospective partners ideal anymore. Just like today, the Sumerians idolized women with well-endowed bodily features, especially big hips were particularly mentioned. The marriage was contracted with the father of the bride giving her a dowry which could be her surety or insurance in case of divorce. Families exchange gifts among themselves as part of the marriage ceremony. The groom, especially, must give gifts to his would-be father-in-law, however, the marriage is not complete unless the marriage is consummated by an intercourse between the married couple (Harris 1992:9469; Stol 2016:60-111).

There were cultures where women's role and place in society and marriage were one of equal partners at least for those women who were considered as good as their partners. Such societies recognized the role women played in the success or otherwise of the family venture. They held a maxim that property is made by the husband but expended by the wife and if she managed the household with wisdom and moderation, the family's prosperity increased. Such cultures in the fourth century B.C.E. saw the household as an arena of economic activities with the wife of the home turning raw materials into finished goods, for the dining table or textiles for the manufacture of garments (Eskenazi 2014:11; see also Pomeroy 1994:121).

2.10.3. Divorce

Marriage and divorce were very important stages in the lives of women in most ANE cultures. As much as marriages were expected by every woman in such cultures, divorce was a less frequent occurrence among such societies. Especially there were less frequent

divorces initiated by women, the process of divorcing one's partner was more used by men when they were dissatisfied with their wives. When a man decides to break his marriage vow and had no off-springs with the woman, among the Mesopotamian society she was sent away empty handed. However, if she had children for the man, then he forfeits his property at least during certain periods of their civilization. Or he will have to pay her some amount of compensation. However, during a certain epoch of the history of the Babylonian people, women had the option of divorcing their husbands if they could prove with witnesses that they were being maltreated by the spouse (Harris 1992:948).

Unfaithfulness was a grave offense in the marriage and a major ground for divorcing one's wife. This does not apply to the men, since a man had the right of second marriage or even having a concubine or an affair with a slave girl. When a woman was caught in an act of unfaithfulness, her husband had the right of punishing her and her lover if the man knew of her marital status and yet decided to have an affair with her. However, if a woman was abandoned for about five years she could remarry. There has been an instance where a man sold his wife into bondage (cf. Stol 2016:82; Harris 1992:9469; see also Marsman 2003:48). Inability to have children could also be grounds for divorce in certain instances, in such cases the man must pay the woman's bride price again to her family (Stol 2016:163,164).

2.10.4. Widowhood and childlessness

Widowhood and childlessness were two of the most debilitating misfortunes a woman could ever find herself. Such women had no protection and social support and as a result, some were left with no option than to result to prostitution. Widows without children were often denied the inheritance of the deceased husbands (Meyers 2011: 91-92,106).

2.10.5. Women with royal status

The life and activities of a queen demonstrated that she had a lot of power and influence in her daily life. This influence was not only limited to her sphere of life, but it extended to other areas of public and social realm. She was as influential as her husband, the king, in terms of religious, diplomatic, administrative and economic responsibilities. Except for

military and legal duties, the queen, superintended over a large household, which among other activities, produced sellable commodities for the market. This she does, in addition to running a large agricultural estate. These activities required a large work force. The products of both her cottage industry and farming activity were sold, probably to “acquire goods and materials that the household did not produce itself” (cf. Maekawa 1973:4; Glassner 1989:33; Crawford 2014:13-14). This picture of the status and influence of a queen is similar to the status and activities of the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31.

There are records from Mari, suggesting that the queen was part of the royal entourage that receives foreign dignitaries at the palace. It does not, therefore, leave any one in doubt about the status of the queen at the palace during this period (Ziegler 1999:7; Crawford 2014:15). Such royal women also performed cultic duties, even if they were not priestesses, for example, Van de Mieroop (1999:158) states that from the “Puzrish Dagan, an animal collection point, shows that in the Ur III period, one shulgi’s queen, shulgi-Simtu, had responsibility for supplying animals for a variety of cultic purposes. What is more, most of the animals originated from other women” (cf. Crawford 2014:15-16). Generally, women from royal background wielded a lot of influence, even if they had no official position in the societal set up (Kennedy 2004: chapter 7). The same can be said of the queens and female monarchs of the Hebrew nation not forgetting Jezebel (1 Kgs 16: 31; 18:13; 19:1-2; 21 and in 2 Kgs 9:30-37) and Athaliah (2 Kgs 11) who ruled Judah in her own right as a monarch. These women were as influential as their male counterparts in the history of the monarchy both in Israel and Judah.

2.10.6. Women with other (legal) status

Due to the sheer load of administrative, domestic, and economic activities, which is undertaken at the royal household by these royal women. There was always a need for professionals to assist in these activities. These professionals were not exclusively females. There are records to the effect that there were some males working as employees of these women of royal status (Ziegler 1999:8; Buccellati & Buccellati 1995:6)

There were also lady clerks. They were as trained as were their male counterparts. Also, any big house settlement used the services of farm workers, farm grass-cutters, pot makers and so on, as well as weavers, spinners, tanners, and other textile workers, all of which were tasks undertaken by women (Ziegler 1999:8). Further, Mari documents reveals that there were female doctors and wet nurses (Crawford 2014:17). There were females who were involved in purchasing and retailing of assets, while some served as surety for third parties. There was a law suit which was initiated by a woman who had lost her husband, she filed the case against her late husband's brother. She prayed the court to compel her brother-in-law to share her late father-in-law's asset with her. The court pronounced judgement in her favour and the brother-in-law gave to her, her share of the assets (Van de Mieroop 1989:57; cf. Owen 1980:170-184; Assante 2003:13-47).

Irrespective of the interpretation held by others, the Mesopotamian evolution which was made up of Sumerian, Babylonian and the Assyrian cultures were organized around the headship of fathers in the family. This is buttressed by the Hammurabi's laws which were made up of many regulations guiding the actions of the females. Usually, women did not have the power to buy land on their own, even though they could assist their families to grow crops and manage the harvest. However, in the Ancient Near Eastern literatures, it was established that knitting and textile industry in general was accessible to women (Harris 1992: 9468; Walton, Matthews & Chavalas 2000: 570; see also Kramer 1976:12-21).

2.10.7. Women in the Hebrew culture

The Hebrew culture does not accord its women the right of descent and inheritance, she is raised from childhood with the notion that she will leave one day to become part of her husband's family. This makes her an alien in her own parents' home while in her husband's family she is seen as an outsider, she does not have the rights that her own sons have in her own house or that of her husband's family. This makes the Hebrew woman marginalized and disinherited in their cultural system. The male heads the family and this makes the female subsumed in the life of the male head or the husband. A woman's legal status is defined in either in her father or her husband, except divorced women, widows without a son and comfort women who could represent themselves,

every woman was identified by a male relative as their legal status (Bird 1992:9475-9476;9480).

Ordinary women did not have the right to inherit their father's landed property unless a special arrangement was made to that effect. Most of the times instead of a woman inheriting the father's landed property an endogamous marriage arrangement with a close family relative was preferable to maintain the family's hold on their land. In this regard, considerations involved in the choice of a marriage partner was deemed very important for women beside religious and ethnic considerations (Num 27:1-11; 36:1-9; Marsman 2003:66-67).

Women usually married very early, not long after their puberty, this is around the age of sixteen or not too long after that. Marriage was the most important point in every woman's life beside the ability to have children (cf. Loader 2004:695). The role of a wife is most often synonymous with being the mother of her children, this is because of the primary role the Hebrew woman was expected to play in the family and society: motherhood. A woman's major recognition is found in her ability to have children without which her significance in their socio-cultural system was insignificant (Jud 21:16,17; Gen 1:28). A woman's inability to have children is seen as the greatest dishonour that could befall any woman in that culture (Gen 30:23; 2 Sam 6:20-23). Sometimes it is equated with curse and God's disapproval of the woman (Marsman 2003:61,68).

Her role as a wife and a mother makes her the fulcrum of the family unit, she must cook and clean, she is also responsible for the education of the infants and the guidance of the older children. The older daughters, servants, daughters-in-laws are all under her supervision. She must be responsible for the clothing of the family both the husband and the children. This sometimes requires the back breaking work of spinning and weaving of thread to make the textile that is needed to sew the garment for the family. The significance of women's labour which were mainly household centred were readily conspicuous as compared to that of men. It is most probable that women wielded a lot of influence since their work station: The household was the centre of the socio-economic activities of the family unit (Bird 1992:9478; Meyers 2011:102).

Outside the family unit, women played roles which were sometimes seasonal or professional. The seasonal roles could include farm labour and animal husbandry while women who had attained a certain level of expertise served as perfumers, chefs, bread makers, midwives, and nurses. It is believed that when women attain menopause, they assume much wider roles in the community and even their religious³⁹ circles (Ex 38:8;1 Sam 2:22; see Bird 1992:9479).

It is worth noting at this point, that woman in the ANE period were not wholly marginalized or dehumanized as some would want the world to believe, depending on their status, they operated and wielded as much influence as their male counterparts. The next section explores how the females in Ghana have fared over the years, in public life, decision making roles and domestic affairs.

2.11. Gender and feminine issues in the Ghanaian context

2.11.1. Introduction

The human species is sexually differentiated, like many other organisms, there are male and female gender making up the human being. Even though most Ghanaians practices a matrilineal inheritance system, the Ghanaian society is patriarchal in its orientation. The role and status of women in the regular Ghanaian society are generally restricted to culturally accepted roles. The representation of women in politics and public life are not commensurate with their percentage in the general population. The disparity between males and females the world over brings about inequalities, marginalization and communal unfairness, less than desirable economic advancement for that community. This disparity among the sexes shows in all levels of society: Trade and commerce, safety and safekeeping, schooling, health and well-being, and governance in general, just to mention but a few. The rarer females participate in communal governance the higher the chances that the decision made would be gender insensitive. The presence of equal numbers of women in societal governance is therefore an imperative in bridging the disparity that exist between the sexes (Tsikata 2009: iv).

³⁹ Deborah-Judges 4:4-16; Huldah- 2 Kgs 22:14-20; Noadiah -Neh 6:14; Miriam-Ex 15:20.

One can only describe the forces working for and against the marginalization and discrimination of women as dynamic. This is because one would expect that after many concerted efforts by political and state actors for many years, there should be a clear sign of progress but that is not the case, the more it appears progress is being made the more it seems we are still where we started. Culture is the main contributory factor here in this situation, making those women who are in urban areas a lot more liberated. As compared with their rural counterparts who also must contend with poverty in the rural areas of Ghana.

2.11.2. Participation of women in public and decision-making roles

This exploration is restricted to the percentage of women in political, public life and decision-making roles. It also considers the role and status of women in the family unit, the place of affirmative action in correcting the inequalities in Ghana. Since the inception of the 1992 constitution, the percentage of women's representation in the Ghanaian parliament, elective or any appointive positions have been woefully disproportionate in favour of men who are fewer than women in the general population.⁴⁰

Success Rates in Local Government Elections (1994, 1998, 2002, 2006) numbers of candidates compared with the percentage elected by sex						
CONTESTANTS ELECTED						
YEAR	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL	FEMALE%	MALE%	TOTAL
2006	1772	13084	14856	478 (26.98)	4254 (32.5)	4732
2002	965	12625	13590	341 (35.3)	4241 (33.6)	4582

⁴⁰Overall female makes up 50.7% and males 49.3% of Ghana's population (Ghana Statistical service, 2021:2).

1998	547	14696	15243	196 (35.8)	4624 (31.5)	4820
1994	NA	NA	NA	122	4082	4204

Source: The Electoral commission of Ghana, 1998, 2002, 2006.

The table shows that the number of female participants in the district level elections for years under consideration have always been fewer than that of the men. Few women offer themselves for elections and their performance in percentage terms is not encouraging. But the lot of women in the national level elections have always been abysmal. Tsikata (2009: v; see also Madsen, 2019:3) decried the number of women in the parliament of Ghana after the 2008 general election from 11% of the previous parliament to 9%, and it rose again to 13%⁴¹ during the just-ended parliament (2016-2020). It is the highest since democracy commenced in Ghana.⁴² While Rwanda for example, had 61% of all the members of her parliament representative to be women during the same year under consideration, it must be said, however, that, during the presidency of Atta Mills (2009-2012) there was a female speaker of the parliament and a female chief justice.

As a result of the abysmal performance of females in the legislative contest, the feminist advocate sect made a declaration and requested equal representation of women in the cabinet appointments. They suggested several females who they believed could be appointed into various ministerial and deputy ministerial positions. The president subsequently selected five females' cabinet ministers with some leading law and order, commerce, manufacturing and value addition and information. After such a remarkable initial appointment the president resumed the old patterns of selection with only 23%

⁴¹ "The level of female representation in parliament in Ghana, 13%, is far below the average both in the world (23%) and in Africa (24%). The percentage calculation is based on women representation in unicameral parliaments or the lower house of parliament. All data reflects the situation on 1 January 2017." Source: UN Women, 2017.

⁴² Madsen, (2019:3) further gives a breakdown of the performance of women in the representative assembly since the commencement of multiparty democracy in Ghana from the 1960-9%; 1965-10%; 1969-1%; 1979-4%; 1992-8%; 1996-10%; 2000-10%; 2004-11%; 2008-9%; 2012-11%; 2016-13%.

ministerial appointments and 16% deputy ministerial appointments for women (Tsikata 2009:3).

Women in Ghana, as far as public life and economic empowerments are concerned have been marginalized if not treated as second class citizens.⁴³ It was in anticipation of this lopsided gender inequity in politics and public leadership that affirmative action was first introduced in Ghana soon after the independence of the country from colonialism.

2.11.3. Affirmative action and women's empowerment

Affirmative action is made up of steps that are taken by governmental and nongovernmental bodies such as schools, partisan organizations, firms, and establishments to deal with an institutionalized segregation and marginalization in any society, the country, or an institution. Further, it is to give a certain marginalized group deliberate shot in the arm to bring them up to the level with other groups. Some countries⁴⁴ have used affirmative action successfully and encouraged gender and racial equality (Tsikata 2009:4-5; cf. Madsen 2019:5). It is believed that marginalization and segregation usually does not correct itself unless a concerted effort is made to reverse the discrimination that is perpetuated against the marginalized group (UNIFEM 2008). However, Ghana is yet to realize the gains of affirmative action since its inception in 1959.⁴⁵

Ghana's affirmative action was driven by the desire to bring the female population into the mainstream of public and economic life at least 40% participation of women. "The Affirmative Action Policy formulated in 1998 by the government after the Beijing (2001)

⁴³ "2010 population and housing census reveals that, the proportion of females employed except in service and sales are lower in comparison with the males. Females constitute 92% of the labour force in the informal sector; females working in the non-agricultural sector is 31.7%; employers who are females are 3.7%; and only 27 of females 15 years and above own an account at a formal financial institution. World Bank statistics from 2010 illustrate that 84% of the Ghanaian active female population are engaged in vulnerable employment, meaning unpaid family work or own account work".

⁴⁴ "USA and South Africa effectively adopted the affirmative action to correct the racial and gender imbalance" (Tsikata 2009:4).

⁴⁵ "Paradoxically, Ghana was one of the first countries in Africa to introduce a quota: in 1959, the Convention People's Party (CPP) government, led by independent Ghana's first prime minister, Kwame Nkrumah, passed the Representation of the People (Women Members) Act. This ensured the nomination and election of ten women to parliament, and was acknowledgement of the important role of women during the struggle for independence" (Madsen 2019:3).

plan of action set targets of 40% representation of women at all levels of governance, on public boards, commissions, councils, committees and official boards including cabinet and council of state.” (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection 2015:10) After 24 years of affirmative action, the state of the Ghanaian woman is not better than her predecessor since Ghana became a nation.

2.11.4. Condition of women in the family

The state of the Ghanaian woman in domestic settings is not any better than the condition of the female in public life. Statistics has it that, there are more divorce and more female headed families. Boateng (1996:2) laments that “the breakdown of marriages has also partly contributed to the emergence of single parenthood in Ghana. Generally, one-quarter of single parents are males, while three quarters are females. Single-parent families which are headed by women are more vulnerable families.” This means that there are a lot more vulnerable female single parents than males. National Gender Policy (2015:10) postulates that “Women are more likely to be poor compared with their male counterparts. Using asset poverty, it was also found out that the total and mean value of gross wealth of women to be lower than those of men for all asset categories. In addition, wealth by gender in Ghana is biased in favour of men.” Boateng (1996:2) argues that “more and more households are being headed by women now than before.” In a recent survey, 52% of households were found to have female heads. These women assume the role of providing income as well as other resources for their households and notably for their children.”

Ghana has ratified all the international conventions on the human rights and protection of the vulnerable, and yet the Ghanaian woman is not able to compete with the male counterpart in public office positions equally. How does this abysmal performance of women in the Ghanaian society reflect their image in the Old Testament and ANE scholarship?

2.12. Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern scholarship on feminism

2.12.1. Genesis of feminism in OT scholarship

Bellis (2007:6) defined feminism “as a point of view in which women are understood to be fully human and thus entitled to equal rights and privileges. In no sense can they be considered subordinate or inferior.” Some scholars have traced the beginning of feminism in biblical studies and in the Old Testament in particular, from the 1830s and the 1840s. This was when the conscious and a concerted effort to demand the recognition and the rights that are due women as human beings gained momentum. Their zeal was directed at the proper interpretation of the Bible, since in their minds, that was the root of the problem (Cf. Zikmund 1985:22-2; Lee 1982:23-24,166; see also, Richardson 1980:16-19; Wills & Newman 1982: 137,138 Bellis 2007:5). In the 1880s the women’s bible was published by the effort of a group of women. Few of these women were trained theologians. These women were professionals from all social classes, and were of the conviction that the subordination of women in society needs to change. To address this problem, one of the first points of call was the so-called androcentric interpretation of the Bible (Cf. Stanton 1898:23,24,166; Bellis 2007:5; Behnke 1982:113-140, 221-244; Shectman 2009a:12).

Over the years the Hebrew Bible has directed the way women were perceived in the Christian countries of the western hemisphere. Women’s rights movements from their beginning included a proper interpretation of the Christian scripture in their attempt to correct the marginalization of women in the public and social life. They reasoned that over the years, the role and the status of women in society has been partly due to erroneous interpretation of some text in the Christian scripture. For example, they argue that a wrong interpretation of Genesis 2-3 over the years has been the basis of the perception of women as feeble, naïve, and responsible for the eventual removal of humanity from the garden of Eden and brought humanity into the hash world of rebellion (Hodgson-Wright 2000:6; see also Shectman 2009b:11). However, it was not until 1894 that the first woman was accepted into membership of the Society of Biblical Literature, the association of biblical scholars (Zikmund 1998:24).

Bellis (2007:5) states that the attempt to develop feminine friendly interpretational tools had a long road to travel. It was not until the 1970s that this endeavour gathered speed. There are those who consider this stage as the second mile stone in their organizational history. They started with the hope of restoring the proper interpretation of those texts that have over the years been misinterpreted. Hither to this time, interpretation of the Bible had been mainly male dominated activity. There were many female Bible scholars who took upon themselves to engage in the reinterpretation of the bias interpretation of male centredness and role of the father as the perpetual head of the family. All in their quest to give a balanced view of those biblical text.⁴⁶ Then they were faced with the stark reality, the awareness that, it was not only wrong interpretation, but there are some problematic passages in the Hebrew bible (Bellis 2007:5).

Bellis (2007:5) went on stating that “soon it was recognized, however, not only those past interpretations were sexist but that many of the texts themselves also presented serious problems. For example, how do we handle the difference between the way God reacts to Sarah’s and to Abraham’s incredulity at the news of an impending old-age pregnancy” (Gen17:17; 18:12). This realization brought sharp division among the feminist movement. There were those who advocated complete relegation of the Bible, religion, and its institutions into the archives of time and as irrelevant to modern society. However, some feminists though acknowledged the sexist nature of some portions of the Bible, insisted that it must still be regarded as authoritative and religious institutions still relevant (Bellis 2007:5). Some have regarded this period as the third face of the feminist movement.⁴⁷ Some scholars have outlined the following as the divisions of those feminists who did not disavow the Bible completely, and still held it as authoritative.

1. The loyalist method practice the pyramid of facts technique. This can be seen vividly expressed in how Ephesians 5 is interpreted in the light of

⁴⁶ See Behnke (1982) “The Female Exegetes” and “The Weight of Biblical Evidence,” in *Religious Issues in Nineteenth Century Feminism* Troy, NY: Whitson Publishing Co., 113-40, 221-44; Bushnell (1992).

⁴⁷ Bellis (2007:21) notes: “For most feminist Jews and Christians, the basic tenets of feminism are non-debatable. How one understands the Scriptures is open to consideration. On one end of the spectrum are those who can find no way of resolving the tension between feminism and the Bible. For them, the Bible is irremediably androcentric, irredeemably sexist. Many feminists in this group do not wish to renounce religion entirely, only the sexist forms of it they find oppressive”.

Galatians 3:28 as reciprocal respect between married couple. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

2. A universalist and essentialist style is adopted by a section of female activists; these are most of the time hand in hand with the loyalist slant. They give precedence to some text that are eternal like Galatians 3:28 over those that were supposed to deal with a particular historical situation. like 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 which ask women to cover their hair or wear a certain kind of hair do.

3. The compensatory approach pursues an equilibrium between male centred biblical text with equally vibrant narratives of exploits of female characters or matriarchs.

4. The contrast methodology seeks to establish the difference between biblical context and contemporary context.

5. The redemptive tactic has as its aim to rescue the Bible from male dominated influence. This approach and the third method seem to share some commonalities. This route is pursued by assembling biblical quotation that exhibits feminine strength and narrates these accounts to those who suffer from male centred abuse of biblical interpretation (Fiorenza 1992:231-234, 145-146, 245; cf. Bellis 2007:21).

2.12.2. Feminism, womanism and Bosadi

During the feminist movement, black women in America especially, felt that they were like stepsisters among the white women championing the feminist agenda. Their concerns were not mainstreamed and in order not to feel marginalized again even among women solidarity, womanism was formed to cater for the needs of African American women.

Sanders (1989:83) opines that

“Womanism as Womanist refers to a particular dimension of the culture of black women that is being brought to bear upon theological, ethical, biblical and other religious studies. The creative genius of Alice Walker has sparked these new interpretations of Black women’s religious experience and ideas. She defines the term womanist in her 1983 collection of prose writings in ‘Search of Our Mothers Gardens’. In essence, womanist means black feminist.”

We have feminism which aims at making sure that the female gender is not regarded as inferior or second best to male gender. Womanism co-existing as an off-shot of feminism seeking to protect the interest of African American women or black women.

There is also the *Bosadi (womanhood)*, a term coined by an African, South African feminist to express the shade of feminism that is characteristically South African. *Bosadi* interpreters are concerned with the place of womanhood in the South African struggle for liberation and the new South Africa. An outline of the tenets of *Bosadi*:

1. An evaluation of fundamentals that subjugate females in African context and the reinforcement of characteristics that elevate females.
2. An analysis of the essentials in the Bible that repress womenfolk, whereas stressing the redemptive foundations.
3. Consciousness of the interaction of post-apartheid discrimination, chauvinism, classism in the African context that outlines the reading of the Bible.
4. Mindfulness of the African notion of botho/ubuntu, which emphasizes the harmony and communality of all Africans, which means that the liberty of all African women entails the participation of all Africans, both menfolk and womenfolk.
5. Awareness of the significance of the family, which however should not be interpreted to require rigid gender roles (Masenya 2001:148-149; see also Bellis 2007:12).

Womanism and *Bosadi* have some commonality, in their attitude towards men, while the feminist regards men as the problem, womanism, black feminist and *Bosadi* sees men as their counterpart in the struggle for liberation. Among the African Americans womanism is feminism and more. It is more vibrant and daring as compared to western Europeans and the North American white concept of feminism. One of the most fundamental differences between the two is their concept of men. Caucasian women do not recognize in their men-folk camaraderie nor do they see that in any man. However, black women share a strong bond of solidarity with their men. White women identify men, both black and white as the problem or the root cause of sexism and classism. While black women acknowledge the presence of sexism among their men and men in general. That notwithstanding, due to their mutual history of suffering in the hands of the racist and the oppressive experience during slavery and sexual exploitation of black women by white men. The bond of unity shared with their men-folk is stronger than the antipathy towards them. This dynamic makes it difficult for womanist to alienate their men for perceived sexism or any discrimination they may be guilty of (Bellis 2007:10,11).

Most people, male and female, agree in principle, that men and women are equal. However, men and women are not the same physiologically and anatomically. There are growing scientific data to the effect that men and women have different brains,⁴⁸ which presupposes that the genders may not have the same mental processes and may perceive and process reality differently. It is therefore reasonable to accept that men and women are equal as a human species but, different in their perspective and orientation, making them experience and interprets reality differently. The study explores an Akan woman (Obaasima) of worth as a concept and apply it to the outcome of the study in the penultimate chapter.

2.13. Comparison between the Akan and Hebrew cultures

Like every culture, males and females have their roles and place in both the Akan and the Hebrew cultures. Among the Akan there is the female domestic and petty trading and

⁴⁸ See Kimura (1992: 91, 92, 97; see also Belis 2007:6).

the male public and leadership positions. There are exceptions to this classification depending on the status of the woman, that is, if she is of a royal, highly educated or an affluent background, such description may not be applicable.

Both cultures are family centred and the economy is organized around the family unit. There is a growing single parent family tendency among the population in Ghana, including the Akan. Female headed single parent's families are more economically challenged than the male single parent's homes. Women in the Ghanaian Akan villages are more economically disadvantaged than those in urban areas.

The Hebrew woman shared with her husband the responsibility of passing on wisdom and instructions to their children (Prov. 31:1-9; cf. 1:8; 6:20; 10:1; 15:20; 23:22-25). The wife is the manager of the household (Prov. 31:10-31), and a counsellor to her husband and her children (1 Sam 25 and 1 Kgs 21). In exceptional situations women played leadership roles in the society (2 Sam 14;20). There was a woman judge and a prophetess and even a monarch (2 Kgs 22:11-20; Jdg 4-5; 2 Kgs 11).

Both cultures are a male headed family system, which constitute the nucleus of the society, and succession is traced through a male line and inheritance is also male oriented. This is against the background that the Akan who are matrilineal and the Hebrew are patrilineal system of inheritance. Women were seen as outsiders in both their father's house and in their husband's house among the Hebrews, however, this is not the case among the Akan (cf. Bird 1992:9475).

Men and women in both cultures played complementary roles in their quest to maintain the family unit and raise their children. The mainly domestic sphere of women and the public sphere of men are not status symbols of the genders, but a division of labour sometimes based on their biological composition.

2.14. Synthesis

There is consensus among commentators that the book of Proverbs is more of an anthology than a unit. Internal evidence shows that there are different collections which were brought together to form the book of Proverbs as we have it now. Solomon's name

associated with the book could not be interpreted as an author of the whole book. It is possible he had some links with some sections of the collections, but his association is more of an attempt to give credibility to the Hebrew wisdom of Proverbs. It is most probable that Agur and Lemuel were historical figures who belonged to the Massa community. There is no conclusive agreement on the possible date of writing. Some have proposed a date as late as the post-exilic Persian period as a possible date of final editing or redaction of the collection. While others prefer a date as early as before the monarchy.

Wisdom literature in the ANE have similar characteristics, making the Hebrew wisdom literature no different from their neighbours.' Besides the usual similarities between the Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom with the Hebrew wisdom, there is also the presence of wisdom like the Hebrew wisdom in Greece.

The limited appearances of women in the sacred records of the Hebrew nation cannot be used to describe the society as androcentric or patriarchal. The few women who made appearance had as much say as their male counterparts (Sarah; Rebecca; Abigail). That the female domestic and male public life was a complementary role played in the family economy.

The role and the settings of the woman of valour in Proverbs 31:10-31 are like those of women from affluent or royal families like queens in most ANE societies. There is the possibility that this woman of valour was probably of royal background, possibly a princess or a queen from one of the neighbouring cultures. The poem was written as an ode to womanhood and as a result, did not have the need to present the husbands roles except when it had a positive bearing on her status. It is most probable that this poem was written as a literary creation with a didactic purpose to chaperon the women-folk into excellent behaviour.

The MT appears to be an edited version of the LXX especially in the arrangements of the chapters at the end of the collection. He/she (the editor) might have purposely brought the two foreign poems at the end as an appendix to the collection, thereby suggesting that the two last poems of the collection could belong together and creating a supportive environment for the final poem (*paratext*). This could also suggest that the author of the

last poem is the mother of king Lemuel and that the last poem is also a mother's advice to her children both prospective bride and groom.

The lack of historical identity of Lemuel, his mother and king Agur are the gap I found in the literature study so far and attempt would be made to identify who these personalities were starting with if they were historical figures in the first place.

CHAPTER THREE

Synchronic and diachronic analyses

3.1. Introduction

This chapter deals with the study of the text through time and how it has been shaped into its present state. This section will include the translation, textual criticism, *genre*, style, and the life setting of the poem (*Sitz im Leben*). The chapter will also analyse the poem as a finished piece of literature, this will include literary placement (*Sitz in der Literatur*) of the poem in the context of Proverbs and its function at the end of the collection.

3.2. Genre and style

The style of a literary work is determined by the selection of the process and format for articulating the message (Hayes and Holladay 1987:74). Poetry as universal literary piece has its own effect on the audience whenever a message is delivered in this format. However, an alphabetic acrostic, has its own added effect on the audience and it serves as a mnemonic device either to help the memory to retain the message or to help students to learn the alphabets. Goldingay (2010:607) insist that “the use of the alphabetic acrostic style suggest a complete exploration of its subject.” Here in this poem, the third, fourth and the fifth stages of rhetoric⁴⁹ are fused together in the use of the alphabetic acrostic device in writing the poem (cf. Hayes and Holladay 1987:4). The poem was written mostly in synthetic parallelism⁵⁰ that means that the second line adds extra information to that of the first line. This, I guess was deliberate argument style to drum home the qualities of the exceptional woman.

Apple (2011:180) alludes to the fact that the poem was used as one of the “liturgies (recitation) of the family whenever, they were entering the sabbath. It was popularly understood as a gracious tribute to the Jewish woman.” The poem was written as a

⁴⁹ The five stages of rhetoric are “invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery” (Hayes and Holladay 1987:74).

⁵⁰ Except for the ultimate and the penultimate verses of the poem which were written with some kind of synonymous and antithetic parallelism.

“purposeful” material or message to effect a certain change or to demand an action. Its rhetorical properties are highly developed and as a result a classic piece of rhetoric.

3.2.1. Genre

3.2.2. Introduction

The study of literary types or categories (*Genres*) does not consider bigger literary units but usually interested in the small units like pericope. What is more, it is that aspect of the study which analyses the arrangements (form) constituents (contents) and the purpose (function) of a type or subtype and inquire if it is fixed or recognizable and characteristic enough for the type to be grouped and understood as constituting an identifiable group. When these conditions happen in the same form and style and if they are in a fixed pattern in all instances then the type can be said to be part of a *genre* (Hayes & Holladay 1987:83). It is important to know the *genre* of a passage, because it affords exegetes the opportunity to know which questions to put to the text.

Furthermore, the expression “in life” demands consideration of the real-life environment or background in which a literary arrangement (form) or sentence came about and were used. In this regard we are prepared to harness the recognition that the literary arrangement (form) and constituent (content) are connected in creating intelligible expression (meaning). This is the realization that form, content and where it was said (setting in life) constitutes the basic units of intelligible expressions from different literary forms not excluding Old Testament literature (Hayes & Holladay 1987:84).

This section of the research is interested in the classification of the poem (Prov. 31:10-31) in its various *genre(s)* and apply the outcome to the social realities of the ancient Hebrew nation and her Ancient Near Eastern environment on the one hand. Not only that, but also, the Ghanaian-Akan cultural settings on the other.

Some scholars, spear-headed by Alter (1985:183-184; cf. Potgieter 2002:1372; also, Burden 1986:40) are of the opinion that “the form of a discourse can be regarded as means by which the writer utilizes the available resources of literary expression to allow a fuller understanding of the message”. Ricoeur (1977:15) warned against the placing of a dichotomy between the form and content of a discourse. He insists that “the form in

which a message was encoded and the content that the message communicated were inextricably interwoven.” Mckane ([1979] 1990:167) stated that what is said could not be detached from how it is said, since the force of any discourse arises out of a blending of form and content; separating them would neutralize that form. The identification of the *genre* enables an exegete to ask an informed question of the text. There is consensus among some scholars about the significance of the linguistic structure of a text. They insist that it cannot be over emphasized; this is because, the key to interpreting and appreciating a text itself is how it was encoded (cf. Human 1999:357; Burden 1986:40; Loader 1986:112)

3.2.3. Hebrew Poetry

Proverbs 31:10-31 belongs to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.⁵¹ Scholars are not unanimous about literary organization of the book of Proverbs and by extension the text under study. There are those who argue that the style of writing in the book of Proverbs cannot be described as poetic.⁵² There are those on the other side who are convinced that it has enough characterization of a poetic literature.⁵³ Deist (1986:23-24) insists that “a text can be described by at least two aspects, namely, how it is organized and how it functions.”

Harvey (1980:1077-1081; *contra* Jansen 2020:80; see Fox 2009:902) states that one of the first things a reader or researcher needs to determine is whether he/she is reading poetry or prose. And one of the ways to do that is to identify what makes a literary work prose or poetry. Unlike prose, Hebrew poetic literature does not have all the characteristic organizational style as those of western (English) poetry. However, Hebrew poetry can be identified characterizably by the features of parallelism, as the main style of Hebrew poetry, and of repetition as stylistic features.

The incidence of corresponding pairs of lines in verses in literary works has been known by some dialects such as Chinese, Finish, Mongolian, and Russian not forgetting Hebrew,

⁵¹ Refer to chapter two of this study.

⁵² Cf. Alter (1985:3-4); Burden (1986:51); Petersen & Richards (1992:1-2).

⁵³ Cf. Alter (1985: 204); Byargeon (2002:281); Landy (1984:62); Nel (1992:135); Petersen & Richards (1992:1-2).

Ugaritic and other semitic dialects. In the west, it was Robert Lowth (1935) who set the basis for methodical investigation into the incidence of corresponding pairs of lines in a verse, in his *De Sacra poesi hebraiorum* (1753; see also Tsumara 2009:167-181). He classified Hebrew parallelism into three semantic categories: synonymous⁵⁴, antithetic⁵⁵, and synthetic⁵⁶.

Three different sets of (semantic) parallelism were identified in the Hebrew poetry, they are synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic parallelism. The first type: synonymous parallelism can be identified in Psalm 19. The initial section of the line one heavens has a parallel section corresponding to it in the firmament in the second line. If all the terms in line one has counterparts to correspond in line two, the parallelism is said to be complete synonymous parallelism. What is more, when the parallelism is found in the same distich or verse it is consider interior or internal parallelism. However, if the correspondent units are found in a different distich or verse it is considered exterior or external parallelism (Bullock 1985:43).

On the other hand, synonymous parallelism can be termed incomplete, when there are no correspondent units to be found to have the same thought expressed differently in the corresponding line. Psalm 24:1 exemplify this type of synonymous parallelism.

“The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness,” /

“The world and those who dwell in it.” //

The earth has a correspondence in the second line as the world, but, ‘is -the- Lord’s’ does not have any correspondence in the second line. Nor can one describe “all the fullness” and those who dwell in it” as an apt correspondence of the two lines (Bullock 1985:44).

⁵⁴ “In this instance, the same thing is repeated in different words eg Psalm 36:5” (Tsumara 2009:170).

⁵⁵ “In which the second member of a line (or verse) gives the obverse side of the same thought e.g., Prov 10:1” (Tsumara 2009:170).

⁵⁶ “Also called constructive and epithetic. In this the second member adds something fresh to the first, or else explains it, e.g., Ps 19:8”. Gapping: “one sentence through two lines and second line is dependent on the first line” (Tsumara 2009:171-172).

The next category of parallelism is the antithetic parallelism, here in this group of parallelism in the Hebrew poetry, the idea expressed in the second line is *contra* or opposite to that of the first line. Psalm 1:16 is a typical antithetic parallelism;

“For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,” /

“But the way of the ungodly shall perish.” //

The third and final group of parallelism identified by Lowth (1935) is synthetic parallelism. This type does not have its borders well demarcated and as a result generate some controversy. “A verse is said to be synthetic when the idea in the first line does not have its correspondence in the second but rather has an extension of the thought in the second line” (Bullock 1985:45-48; cf. Perdue 2000:276; see also Harvey 1980:1077-1081).

Psalm 1:2-3 could be an example:

“But his delight is in the law of the Lord,” /

“And in his law doth he meditates day and night”

“And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water”/

“That brings forth his fruits in his season.” //

This is the first group of parallelism that is known as the semantic parallelism, there are two other groups of parallelism that will be defined in the following section.

So far parallelism has been defined in terms of the meaning of words (semantically). However, it is also possible to define parallelism in terms of linguistic and syntactical features. In this regard, parallelism can be defined as expressing one sentence in two lines grammatically. Here the corresponding features are grammar and not just words but how words have been arranged. So, when line one has corresponding relations with line two in terms of the arrangements of the words in both lines, we can say that we have grammatical parallelism (Tsumara 2009:169; cf. Jakobson 1966:402; and Niccacci 1997:89). Kaiser (1981:219) also identified same as grammatical parallelism, here words in line one corresponds with words in line two in arrangements not in meaning. We are talking about grammatical arrangements of words: subject, verb, direct objects and not in meaning. The third is Rhetorical parallelism, in this category the composition is done with the intention to produce fictional or theatrical effect on the audience.

In addition to the characteristics of parallelism as an identifying feature of Hebrew poetry, Hebrew poetry is also exceptional particularly with the non-appearance of or rare incidence of certain linguistic features such as:

“(a) the use of the definite articles; (b). the sign of accusative case (Hebrew ,את את the nota accusative); (c). The conjunction ו (Waw; ordinarily translates as “and”); (d). The so-called relative pronoun (Hebrew אשר which, who, that) and; (e). The consecutive or the conversive form of the verbs such as the waw-conversive with the imperfect, which gives the narratives past tense; example ‘and he said’ ויאמר” (Kaiser 1981:212-214; see also Yoder 2001:22).

Kugel (1981:61-87; cf. Alter 1985:4; [1985] 1992:4-7) raises doubt about the identification of poetry and parallelism as characteristic features of Proverbs. He questions any attempt to draw a line between poetry and prose in the biblical literature. Further to this school of thought, is Viljoen (2015:2; cf. Burden 1986:57; see also Petersen & Richards 1992:13) who wonders “if there is any clear-cut dividing line between prose and poetry in the scripture. This is because, there are poetical prose (Ps 78) and prosaic poetry (Ex 2:1-7).” This is brought home forcefully by Landy (1984:78) when he argues that “all imaginative prose has a poetic quality, and a great deal of poetry is prosaic.” However, this does not mean that there is no differentiation between prose and poetry in the scripture (Cf. Berlin [1985] 1992:4; Burden 1986:57; Petersen & Richards 1992:14).

Alter (1985:163) insists that “the poetic nature of the message, is characteristically made plain in the book of Proverbs. Fox (2004a:165) postulates that “parallelism which is crucial to the creation of aphorisms in Proverbs, is highly relevant in studying Proverbs.” What is more, Berlin ([1985] 1992:9; cf. Landy 1984:78) stressed that “parallelism in prose, as in poetry, is the sign of the poetic function.” We can safely suggest that the book of Proverbs

is poetic in nature and by extension, the text under study (Prov. 31:10-31), can be said to be an acrostic⁵⁷ poem in wisdom literature.⁵⁸

Alter (1985:205; Viljoen 2015:4) states that “poetry is a special way of imagining the world, or to put this in more cognitive terms, a special mode of thinking with its own momentum and its own peculiar advantages.” Viljoen (2015:4; see also: Loader 1986:107-110) postulates that “text with a wisdom perspective uses this special way of imagining the world to reference the symbolic world that the wisdom scribes envision for their reader through the text. Figures of speech and poetic devices such as metaphor, antithetic parallelism and chiasm are used to convey the wisdom understanding of reality.” Ricoeur (1976:46) says that “metaphor is a poem in miniature.” Speaking about the metaphoric nature of poetry in Proverbs, Viljoen (2015:5) stressed that “the connection between metaphoric play and poetry provides an important key to understanding Proverbs as poetry. Further, she argued that the book of Proverbs employs metaphoric play to imagine or picture a symbolic reality.”

Poetry’s use of metaphor draws a lot from the readers’ inventive imagination to fill in the holes that have been left unspoken for his or her imagination. To this end, poetry must not be read and interpreted literarily, but must draw on the socio-economic and politico-religious realities of the author to fully grasp the import of what the author intended to communicate with the audience. Melchert (1988:71-72; Ricoeur 1976:52; Viljoen 2015:5) contends that to this end, “the text thus endows its readers with a considerable charge; it becomes their joy and responsibility to fill in the gaps necessarily left by the metaphors. If a metaphor is too manifest, the metaphoric play is frustrated and the metaphor itself is destroyed.”

When the text in verse 15 says “she rises while it is (dark) night” and verse 18 where it reads “her light does not go out in the night”, may not necessarily mean that she does not have enough sleep, but it could mean that she works late into the night and wakes up early in the morning before the break of dawn. And her light does not go out in the night

⁵⁷Alphabetic acrostic has been discussed in the previous chapter; however, scholars consider acrostic as a separate *genre* of its own (cf. Wolters 1988:447; Hanson 1984: 330).

⁵⁸ Wolters (1988:446; see also Murphy 1981:82) says that these scholars described the passage of Proverbs 31:10-31 as “wisdom poem” in line with the initial description by Gunkel.

could mean there is enough supply of wealth.⁵⁹ Also in verse 14, “like the merchant ship she brings her food from a far” could be likened to some women, not satisfied with the condition of transactions in the general market place, usually goes to the farm gates to purchase their supply from the farmers, fresh and less expensive (Wolters 1988:454).

3.2.4 What type of poem is Proverbs 31:10-31

When all these are brought to bear on our text: Proverbs 31:10-31, the text can be said to be largely synthetic parallelism in its nature. Proverbs 31:10 reads:

“An industrious wife who can find”? /

“Her worth is above precious stones.” //

The thought of the first line, is extended or explained by an additional term of information in the second line, her worth is above precious stones. The second line cannot be said to be mirroring the first or opposing the first but extending the thought of same. Also Proverbs 31:14

“Like the merchant ships,” /

“She brings her bread from afar.” //

There is no correspondence in the different halves of the lines but extra information on the first.

The same cannot be said of the last two verses where there seems to be an antithetic parallelism in verse 30 and some kind of synonymous parallelism at play in verse 31.

“Outward appearance maybe deceptive and temporarily”/

“But the woman who fears the Lord shall be praised”/

“Here in this verse a *contra* view is expressed in the second line of the verse”

31:31

“Her deeds shall recommend her in the gates”/

⁵⁹ Waltke (2005:636; cf. Yoder 2003:436).

“and shall be praised for the fruit of her hands”//.

In this verse we have a kind of incomplete synonymous parallelism. Her deeds in the first line corresponds with the fruits of her hands in the second line, while recommend in the first line corresponds with praised in the second line. However, there is no correspondence to the gates in the second lines. The text can be said to be an acrostic poem in nature, and it belongs to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

3.2.5. Wisdom text with hymnic character

Besides being an acrostic wisdom poem, the text could also be sub classified as a hymn of praise as its function or *subgenre*. This argument is supported by some scholars such as Wolff (1973:250; Wolters 1985:577-587; 1988:447). They allude to the fact that among others,⁶⁰ hymn of praise is one of the sub *genres* that Proverbs 31:10-31 can be assigned to. Proverbs 31:10-31 shares a similar outline with Psalm 112 which has been suggested by most scholars as a Wisdom Psalm. Wolters (1988:448) compared the outlines of both Psalm 112, and Proverbs 31:10-31 and suggested that the text could also be said to have affinity with Wisdom Psalms:

The two poems are written in an alphabetical arrangement that set the successive alphabets taking one verse in a sequential order. They are both having their contents organized in a parallel. Proverbs 31:30 talks about the woman’s fear of the Lord and supported it by enumerating acts that can be said to be done by those who fear the Lord. Psalms 112:1 also mentioned the man who fear the Lord and itemized his God-fearing activities. Again, in Proverbs 31:30, there was the contrast that was drawn between beauty and the fear of the Lord, while Psalm 112:10 contrasted the wicked and the righteous as its epilogue. Both main characters in the two poems (Prov. 31:26; Psalm 112:5) were described in the knowledge of the sapiential skills. Both had children (Prov. 31:28; Ps 112:2) kindness and benevolence to the disadvantaged in society (Prov. 31:20;

⁶⁰ It has also been described as Wisdom Psalms with Psalms 1; 37; 99 and 112 sharing similar core outline (Wolters 1988:448).

Ps 112:4,5, 9) and finally courageous outlook into the future (Prov. 31:25 Ps 112:7,8). These are among the reasons Proverbs 31:10-31 has related to wisdom Psalms.⁶¹

Proverbs 31 and Psalm 112 seem to share similarity in their outlines and interesting enough, here we have a man being eulogised as the hero of the wisdom Psalms, as against a woman in the text under study. However, these similarities between the Wisdom Psalms and the text does not preclude Psalm 111, which is universally acclaimed to be a hymn from being compared with the text on its own right. Some scholars have identified recognizable similarities as the outline of a hymn: the outline of a song can be demarcated as thus: an overview; which calls for the tribute that is owed to the celebrant, the main structure of the song which narrates the excellent conducts and qualities of the hero; the closing appeal to both the person who reads and the addressees to partake in the acclamation (Wolters 1988:449).

Another hymnic character of the text is the use of the verb Wolters (1988:450) calls “the nucleus of the primitive hymn.” He argues that this phrase “*halelu-yah*” usually appears at the beginning and the end of hymns or songs. Strangely enough, this is usually used in songs and hymns in praise of God in the case of the Hebrew nation and a deity of the other nations. However, here in the text, it is in praise of a woman, an exceptional homemaker, and a wife. This is rendered in the Hebrew as *(wi)haleluha* Let her works praise her.

Some scholars argue that poems dedicated to men of valour are common in most cultures such as the ancient master pieces of Greek writer Homer and the old heroic epics of the people of Norway and that of most European countries such as Yugoslavia. This type of poems is made in remembrance of the exploits of the mighty men and women of the yester years. Most of the times they are feats made on the battle fields by men and women of valour. Beside heroic poems, there is also another group of poems which are characteristically brief in nature and they are called panegyric ode which are usually a tribute to successful warriors who come home after war and funeral songs are also made for those who fall on the battle field (Wolters 1988:452).

⁶¹ See Wolters (1988:17), pp 580-4 on the Valiant Woman herself as the embodiment of God-fearing wisdom, see Wolters (1984:164-165).

It is argued by some that those heroic poems in their proper definition are not present in the Hebrew literature. Contrarily to what others suggest about its existence among Hebrew poetry, as found in the song of Deborah; the complaint of David over Saul and Jonathan's death (2 Sam 1); finally, the praise song of the women upon the return of David and Saul from killing Goliath (1 Sam 18 & 21). There are those who even want us to believe that the period under the judges and also David could be consider as heroic epoch (Wolters 1988: 452). However, Wolters argue that this stance is advocated by Bowra because he has not properly identified and defined what panegyric and complaint are in his definition of heroic poems (Wolters 1988: 452). Thus, the *genre* of the text could be described as an acrostic wisdom poem with a heroic hymnic character.

3.3 Text and translation

3.3.1. Introduction

Before an exegesis of a passage, it is worthwhile to examine the ancient witnesses of the poem: Proverbs 31:10-31. This is to ascertain the veracity or otherwise of the document that is to be interpreted. It is said that 'translation is an interpretation. A careful translation is an interpretation half way done'⁶². The Masoretic text⁶³ (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX) are the witnesses for the translation⁶⁴. These two ancient witnesses of Proverbs 31:10-31 are compared, and where they disagree, a determination is made as to how to bring the meaning home to an Akan community of Ghana. Where there is metaphor or a figure of speech, the concept and not the word for word translation is made.

3.3.2. English translation

English translation	Hebrew text
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⁶² Ntreh, Professor of Old Testament, lesson notes on master of Philosophy in Old Testament University of Cape Coast 2004.

⁶³ Westminster Leningrad Codex (Leningrad Codex B 19a "L") considered oldest dated manuscript of the complete Hebrew Bible.

⁶⁴ Longman III (2006:28) suggest that looking at the dates of both source documents A D 1000 and BCE 200 respectively, comparing both documents will yield a lot more dividends than just relaying on just one.

10. "An industrious ⁶⁵ wife who can find"? "Her worth ⁶⁶ is above precious stones" ⁶⁷	אִשְׁת־חַיִל מִי יִמָּצֵא וְרַחֵק מִפְּנִינִים מְכָרָה: ¹⁰
11. "Her spouse is rest assured of sufficient supply ⁶⁸ of provisions."	בְּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בַּעֲלָהּ וְשָׁלָל לֹא יִחָסֵר: ¹¹
12. "She does him good and not evil all the days of her life."	גַּמְלָתָהּ טוֹב וְלֹא רָע כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיהָ: ¹²
13. "She seeks after wool and flax and enjoys working with her hands."	דָּרְשָׁה צֹמֶר וּפְשֵׁתִים וְתַעֲשׂ בְּחִפְזָּה כְּפִיָּה: ¹³
14. "Like the merchant ships, she brings her bread from afar."	הִי־תָהּ כְּאֲנִיּוֹת סוֹחֵר מִמְּרָחֵק תָּבִיא לְחֶמֶת: ¹⁴

⁶⁵ The LXX renders it γυναικα ανδρελωσ a vigorous wife or a manly woman while the MT⁶⁵ uses the word אִשְׁת־חַיִל a woman of ability. This translation combined both the LXX vigorous and the MT ability to arrive at the industrious wife⁶⁵ and not a woman of ability.

⁶⁶ The Hebrew word מְכָרָה is used variously in Numbers 20:19, Neh 13:16; Proverbs 31:10 to mean a "selling price" cost of a commodity (Gen 25:31; Ruth 4:3; Proverbs 31:10) while the LXX uses τιμιωτερα "more esteemed" (than) or "highly esteemed". LXX rendering is preferable to the MT, this is because, a selling price places the wife in the category of a slave or a merchandise.

⁶⁷ The Hebrew word מִפְּנִינִים was used six times in the MT (Job 28:18; Proverbs 3:15 Proverbs 8:11; Proverbs 20:15; Lam 4:7. In all these, it was used to designate rubies. However, the LXX rendered it as λιθων πολυτελων costly stones. Rubies do not occur naturally here in the country (Ghana) as much as other costly (precious) stones such as gold, diamond etc. This translation prefers the LXX costly (precious) stones to the MT's rubies.

⁶⁸ The root of the Hebrew word שָׁלָל was used variously in the MT (Deut 2:35; 3:7; Job 8:27; 2Sam 12:30; 1Ch 20:2; 2 Sam 3:22; Proverbs 31:11; Dan 112:24; Ezekiel 29:19) to mean "loot" or spoils of war (plunder). While the LXX also uses the word σκυ λων spoils, in both the LXX and the MT the various words used to designate spoils or loot were meant to mean provisions which were secured through plunder of a weaker person, a community or country. It is not clear who did the plunder, the wife or the husband, the poem does not provide us with that information. Since we are not sure who did the plunder, it shall be rendered simply of provisions.

5. "She rises while it is still dark ⁶⁹ and apportion supplies ⁷⁰ and instructions ⁷¹ to her household and her servants."	15 וְתִקַּם בְּעוֹד לַיְלָה וְתִתֵּן טָרֶף לְבֵיתָהּ וְחָק לְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ:
16. "She plans for a field and procures it; from the fruit of her hands, she plants vineyard."	16 זָמְמָה שָׂדֵה וְתִקְחֶהּ מִפְּרֵי כַּפֶּיהָ (נָטַע) [נָטְעָה] בְּרֶם:
17. "Girding her loins strongly, she establishes her arms for work."	17 חָגְרָה בְּעוֹז מְתַנְּיָהּ וְתִאֲמָץ זְרַעוֹתֶיהָ:
18. "She enjoys working all night ⁷² because she recognizes the benefit of work. And her light does not go out in the night."	18 טַעַמָּה כִּי־טוֹב סַחֲרָה לֹא־יִכָּבֵהּ (בַּלַּיִל) [בַּלַּיִלָה] נִרְהָ:
19. "she puts forth her hands on the distaff, and her palms hold firm to the spindle."	19 יָדֶיהָ שְׁלַחָה בְּכִישׁוֹר וְכַפֶּיהָ תִּמְכּוּ פְלִדָּ:

⁶⁹The Hebrews reckon the day and night from the sunset to another sunset (Gen1:3), making the day starting from the dark part and the other half being the sunrise to sunset. While the moderns calculate the night from the darkness after the sunset till 12 midnight. And the day starting from 1:00am till another sunset. The word $\nu\kappa\tau\omega\nu$ and לַיְלָה could designate any time before the sun rises. However, the word תִּשְׁךְ is used to designate darkness. This could mean any time before the sunrise at dawn. It is most probable that what was meant was that she wakes up while it is still dark. This is because, it is not practicable for someone to wake up every night of her life, that means she does not get enough sleep, she does not get more than four hours everyday. Elsewhere, we are told that she burns the night oil, that means, she sleeps late. That is why whatever is meant here, could only mean that she wakes up while it is still dark, and could mean any time before sunrise at dawn.

⁷⁰ The Hebrew word טָרֶף which is used variously to mean prey. Makes the poem more like a tribute to a warrior. It has been used 28 times (Numbers 23:24; Psalm 111:5; Psalm 124:6; Proverbs 31:15; Isaiah 5:29; Ezekiel 19:36; Nahum 2:12; Malachi 13:10. Job 4:11; 29:17; 38:39; Psalm 76:4 Ezekiel 22:25; Nahum 3:1; Job 18:4; Psalm 22:13; Nahum 2:12. Genesis 37:33; 44:28; Exodus 22:13. Gen 8:1; Hosea 6:1; Job 16:9.) in the MT. In all the instances except few, they are used to denote a prey in the context of war, military operation, or as a lion prey on other animals. This word is either an anomaly or the poem is not meant to eulogise a woman. This is because it simulates a scene of war and conquest. However, an exception is found in its usage in Ps 111:5; Mal 3:10; Proverbs 31:15 where God is supplying provisions to his people, and in this context (Proverbs 31:15) being a woman providing for her household?

⁷¹ תָּקַן. In Ps 99:7 is used as statute, in Ezekiel 15:14 it is designated as statutory allowance of oil, it could be interpreted as prescription, instructions or laws.

⁷² It is curious that the LXX chose "all night" instead of just stating that she enjoys working in the night. $\epsilon\gamma\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\alpha\tau\omicron\ \sigma\tau\iota\ \kappa\alpha\lambda\omicron\nu\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\ \tau\omicron\ \epsilon\rho\gamma\alpha\zeta\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \sigma\upsilon\kappa\ \alpha\pi\omicron\sigma\beta\epsilon\nu\nu\tau\alpha\iota\ \omicron\lambda\upsilon\chi\nu\omicron\varsigma\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\eta\varsigma\ \omicron\lambda\eta\nu\ \tau\eta\nu\ \nu\upsilon\kappa\tau\alpha.$ A typical case of exaggeration or a hyperbole usually associated with poetry

20. "She spreads out her palm to the humble one and puts forth her hands to the needy one."	כַּפָּה פְּרָשָׁה לְעַנִּי וַיִּדְיָה שְׁלַחָה לְאַבְיוֹן: ²⁰
21. "She does not fear the cold weather ⁷³ , because she gives her household warm clothing."	לֹא־תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשֶּׁלֶג כִּי כָּל־בֵּיתָהּ לְבָשׁ שָׁנִים: ²¹
22. "She gives her husband warm cloths ⁷⁴ and a beautiful dress for herself."	מְרַבְּדִים עֲשֵׂתָהּ־לָּהּ שֵׁשׁ וְאַרְגָּמָן לְבוּשָׁה: ²²
23. "Her husband is respected among the elders of the town, when they meet at the gate." ⁷⁵	נֹדַע בְּשַׁעְרִים בַּעֲלָהּ בְּשַׁבְּתוֹ עִם־זִקְנֵי־אַרָץ: ²³
24. "She makes and sells linen shirts and she produce loincloths for the Canaanites ⁷⁶ traffickers."	סָדִין עֲשֵׂתָהּ וְתַמְכָּר וְחִגּוֹר נָתַתָּה לְכַנְעֲנִי: ²⁴
25. "Strength, honour and beauty ⁷⁷ she puts on and she rejoice in subsequent days."	עֲזֹוְהָדָר לְבוּשָׁה וְתִשְׁחַק לְיוֹם אַחֲרוֹן: ²⁵

⁷³ שֶׁלֶג. Is rendered cold weather instead of snow. The LXX does not have snow. However, the idea of warm clothing is alluded to, this could mean that it is the changing weather situation which is the issue and not necessary the snow.

⁷⁴ This is not in the MT, however, present in the LXX (δισσάς χλαίνας εποίησε τω ανδρί αυτής) it make sense for a good wife to be concern about the wellbeing of her husband.

⁷⁵ The LXX went further to add the word συναδριω "Sanhedrin" to the act of the elders gathering at the gate, which is not found in the MT. This makes the meaning sharp by specify which gathering is being referred to.

⁷⁶The Hebrew word לְכַנְעֲנִי is rendered twice as "to the Canaanite" at Jos13:3 and Ezra 9:1 in the Hebrew text the only time it was rendered trafficker is in current text. This is not attested anywhere, however, the LXX has τοσ χαναναιοις "to the Canaanites." It is possible that their ethnicity and their occupation had become synonymous.

⁷⁷ Both the Greek and the Hebrew text used the word which stands for strength (ועֲזֹוְהָדָר) however, the LXX follows with beauty εσπρηπει αν while the MT follows with honour וְהָדָר. Beauty has not been the focus of this poem; it is most probable that honour was originally intended. But the previous verses spoke about beautiful clothing for the industrious wife. Could it be that this verse is trying to contrast her strength and her fashionable dress? Or the editor/ redactor of the poem has as his or her goal deemphasizing beauty in the poem, and as a result intentionally left it out. So, the combination of the two words (Beauty and strength) will make the meaning sharp.

26. "She opens her mouth with wisdom and the law of charity is on her tongue."	פִּיהָ פִּתְחָהּ בְּחָכְמָה וְתוֹרַת־חֶסֶד עַל־ לְשׁוֹנָהּ:
27. "She watches over the affairs of her house and does not eat the bread of idleness."	צֹפֶיהָ הַלִּיכוֹת בֵּיתָהּ וְלֶחֶם עֲצָלוֹת לֹא תֹאכַל:
28. "Her children ⁷⁸ grow well ⁷⁹ and her husband praise her."	קָמוּ בָנֶיהָ וַיֹּאשְׁרוּהָ בְעֵלָהּ וַיְהַלְלֶהּ:
29. "Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all."	רַבּוֹת בָּנוֹת עָשׂוּ חֵיל וְאַתְּ עֹלִית עַל־כֻּלָּנָהּ:
30. "Outward appearance maybe deceptive and temporarily but the woman who fears the Lord ⁸⁰ shall be praised."	שֶׁקֶר הַחֹזֵן וְהַבֵּל הַיָּפִי אִשָּׁה יִרְאַת־יְהוָה הִיא תִתְהַלֵּל:
31. "Her deeds shall recommend her in the gates and shall be praise for the fruit of her hands."	תִּגְוֹלָהּ מִפְּרֵי יָדֶיהָ וַיְהַלְלוּהָ בְשַׁעְרִים מַעֲשֶׂיהָ:

3.3.3. Comparison of three translations

NRSV	NASV	My translation
¹⁰ "A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels."	¹⁰ "An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels."	10. "An industrious wife who can find? Her worth is above precious stones."

⁷⁸ The Hebrew text used "sons of her" (בְּנֵיהָ) while the Greek text used "children" (τα τέκνα αὐτῆς). This translation prefers children to make it gender inclusive

⁷⁹ Here also the difference in the Hebrew and the Greek text calls for choices to be made. While the Hebrew use the term (וַיֹּאשְׁרוּהָ) to mean "and call her happy", the Greek uses the term (επλουτισαν) that means they grow rich/ well. The disparity is very wide but this translation opted for the Greek rendition of the children growing well, since it dovetails into the next line where the husband praises her.

⁸⁰ The Hebrew text used יְהוָה While the Greek text used κυριου. However, it is instructive to note that in the Greek text most of the times, when the κυριου is used to refer to the covenant God of the Hebrews the word θεος is added to make it κυριου θεου, strangely, this is not the case here only κυριου (Lord) was used.

11 "The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain."	11 "The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain."	11. "Her spouse is rest assured of sufficient supply of provisions."
12 "She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life."	12 "She does him good and not evil All the days of her life."	12. "She does him good and not evil all the days of her life."
13 "She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands."	13 "She looks for wool and flax, and works with her hands in delight."	13. "She seeks after wool and flax and enjoys working with her hands."
14 "She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from far away."	14 "She is like merchant ships; She brings her food from afar."	14. "Like the merchant ships, she brings her bread from afar."
15 "She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls."	15 "She rises also while it is still night, and gives food to her household, And portions to her maidens."	15. "She rises while it is still dark and apportion supplies and instructions to her household and her servants."
16 "She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands, she plants a vineyard."	16 "She considers a field and buys it; From her earnings she plants a vineyard."	16. "She plans for a field and procures it; from the fruit of her hands, she plants vineyard."
17 "She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong."	17 "She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong."	17. "Girding her loins strongly, she establishes her arms for work."
18 "She perceives that her merchandise is profitable."	18 "She senses that her gain is good; Her lamp does not go out at night."	18. "She enjoys working all night, because she recognises the benefit of

Her lamp does not go out at night.”		work. And her light does not go out in the night.”
¹⁹ “She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.”	¹⁹ “She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle.”	19. “she puts forth her hands on the distaff, and her palms hold firm to the spindle.”
²⁰ “She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.”	²⁰ “She extends her hand to the poor; And she stretches out her hands to the needy.”	20. “She spreads out her palm to the humble one and puts forth her hands to the needy One.”
²¹ “She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson.”	²¹ “She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet.”	21. “She does not fear the cold weather, because she gives her household warm clothing.”
²² “She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.”	²² “She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple.”	22. “She gives her husband warm cloths and a beautiful dress for herself.”
²³ “Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.”	²³ “Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land.”	23. “Her husband is respected among the elders of the town, when they meet at the gate.”
²⁴ “She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.”	²⁴ “She makes linen garments and sells <i>them</i> , and supplies belts to the tradesmen.”	24. “She makes and sells linen shirt to the Canaanites Traffickers.”
²⁵ “Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.”	²⁵ “Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she smiles at the future.”	25. “Strength, honour and beauty she puts on and she

		rejoice in subsequent days.”
²⁶ “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.”	²⁶ “She opens her mouth in wisdom, And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.”	26. “She opens her mouth with wisdom and the law of charity is on her tongue.”
²⁷ “She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.”	²⁷ “She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.”	27. “She watches over the affairs of her house and does not eat the bread of idleness.”
²⁸ “Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her.”	²⁸ “Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband <i>also</i> , and he praises her, <i>saying:</i> ”	28. “Her children grow well and her husband praise her.”
²⁹ “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”	²⁹ “Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all.”	29. “Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all.”
³⁰ “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.”	³⁰ “Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, <i>but</i> a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.”	30. “Outward appearance maybe deceptive and temporarily but the woman who fears the Lord shall be praised.”
³¹ “Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.”	³¹ “Give her the product of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.”	31.” Her deeds shall recommend her in the gates and shall be praised for the fruit of her Hands.”

3.3.4. Textual Criticism

McCarter (1986:18) contends that “textual criticism is the science and art that seeks to determine the most reliable wording of a text.” Waltke (1997:157) opines that “in the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS), approximately one textual note appears for every ten words; thus, 90 percent of the text is without significant variations even the errors and textual variations that exist affect the intrinsic message only in instances relatively few”.

However, textual criticism is needed since there is no perfect ancient document (even in the BHS, the present typical depiction of the text, reproduction error can be found). Alternative versions do occur often in the medieval copies of the Masoretic Text tradition (Waltke 1997:48). Waltke (1997:48) insist that “the restoration of the Old Testament text is foundational to the exegetical task and to theological reflection. To reconstruct a readable text the critic must know the history of its witnesses and of scribal practices.” In this text-critical study, the researcher will employ the external criticism (the evaluation of the textual witnesses if any) and the internal criticism (the transcriptional and intrinsic probability of the readings themselves).

Fortunately, the apparatus in BHS provides a few variants readings for Proverbs 31:10-31. They would be discussed as the basis for the choice of the text to be retained for the exegetical analysis.

11

בְּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בְּעֵלְיָהּ וְשָׁלֵל לֹא יִחָסֵר:

בְּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בְּעֵלְיָהּ וְשָׁלֵל לֹא יִחָסְרָהּ:

1.The first reading renders it “her spouse is rest assured of sufficient supply of Provisions.”

2.The LXX⁸¹ reading captures it this way, “the husband’s heart is not afraid of lack of provisions.”

3.The apparatus of BHS suggests that “perhaps לָהּ which could translate as ‘weary’, to be weary from a non-productive effort or to be without result. So, the passage could be emended to read, her husband/spouse is not weary of non-productive effort.

12

מְלַתְהוּ טוֹב וְלֹא־רָע כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיהָ

גְּמַלְתְּהוּ טוֹב וְלֹא־רָע כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיהָ:

1. The first reading states: she does him good and not evil all her life.
2. In the second reading, the BHS suggest that “many Leningrad codex medieval manuscripts of Hebrew Bible editions add the proposition הַ” can be translated as who, which or that. It does not add anything new to the meaning of this verse.

15

וְתָקַם | בְּעוֹד לַיְלָה וְתָתֵן טָרֶף לְבֵיתָהּ וְחָק לְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ:

וְתָקַם | בְּעוֹד לַיְלָה וְתָתֵן טָרַח לְבֵיתָהּ וְחָק לְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ:

וְתָקַם | בְּעוֹד לַיְלָה וְתָתֵן טָרְף:

- 1 In the first reading, טָרֶף is defined by Davidson and Brown, Drivers & Briggs (1907:383) as 1. Prey, 2. Food/provisions 3. Leaf. So instead of prey, provisions or supplies is opted to make the passage suitable to a woman overseeing her household, as against prey that connote spoils of war (Gen 49:9).

⁸¹ θαρσεί επ’ αυτή η καρδιά του ανδρός αυτής. η τοιαύτη καλών σκύλων ουκ πορήσει.

2 The second reading has טָרָה 'burden' (Brown, Drivers & Briggs, 1907:382) instead of טָרֶף (prey, food and leaf) suggested by the apparatus of the BHS. Which means, instead of supplies/provisions in the first reading, the second reading will be: she wakes up while it is still dark and apportions burdens/task and instruction to her household and instruction to her servants. Both readings one and two makes sense in the context of the poem.

However, what does not make sense with either טָרָה and טָרֶף is the fact that

both words are masculine singular which does not fit in well with a woman which is feminine.

3 The third reading deleted the לְנִעְרֹתֶיהָ וְחָק however, the LXX attests to the presence of the instruction to her attendance. Shorter verses are to be preferred, but in this wise, the longer one makes more sense and it is attested by the LXX, so that is accepted as most likely resembling the author's intended text. Unless there is another version of the same poem that does not have this section, that deals with the lady and her servants.

16

זְמַמָּה שָׁדָה וְתַקְתָּהּ מִפְּרֵי כֹפִיָּה נָטַע בְּרָם: K

זְמַמָּה שָׁדָה וְתַקְתָּהּ מִפְּרֵי כֹפִיָּה נָטְעָה בְּרָם: Q

זְמַמָּה שָׁדָה וְתַקְתָּהּ מִפְּרֵי כֹפִיָּה נָטַע בְּרָם:

Verse 16 has a unique feature, the *Kethib* and *Qere* variants. The traditional explanation is that the Masoretic preserved some words in its purely consonantal form in the text (written) while there was a pointed version kept in the margin. However, it is curious that the K and Q variants should apply here, because they are simply feminine (נָטְעָה Qal

perfect 3rd person singular feminine), masculine (עָטַף noun masculine singular construct) and infinitive (עֹטֵף infinitive) of the same word.⁸²

What is more, this poem, is supposed to eulogise a woman of valour, this could suggest that there were or could be different versions of the same poem. Could these variants confirm same?

1. She plans for a field and procures it; from the fruit of her hands, **she** plants Vineyard.
2. She plans for a field and procures it; from the fruit of her hands, **he** plants (a farm or field) of vineyard.⁸³
3. She plans for a field and procures it; from the fruit of her hands, **it**⁸⁴ plants vineyard.

It is obvious that the first reading is the most suitable for this poem, however, it is most curious what is left unsaid: why is the need for masculine and infinitive variants of the same word? Is it possible that the poem under study might have been adapted from a format of heroic⁸⁵ (male) poem?

The construction that best elucidate the variant is chosen; this makes the first reading the most probable of what was intended by the author (Archer 1974:61-62).

17

חָגְרָה בְּעֹז מִתְנִיָּה וְתֵאמֶן זְרַעוֹתֶיהָ:

חָגְרָה בְּעֹז מִתְנִיָּה וְתֵאמֶן זְרַעוֹתֶיהָ לְעַבְדָּה:

⁸²Cf. Davidson (DXLVI, DXLVII); Brown, Driver & Briggs (1907:642).

⁸³ Two nouns may be combined so that the second defines or otherwise particularizes the first page.

⁸⁴ "Infinitives are infinite in the sense that they express the basic idea of a verb root without the limitations of person, gender, and number. The infinitives are verbal nouns, that means that they can behave like verbs and nouns" Kelly (1992:179) The apparatus prefix the third variant with "it has been proposed".

⁸⁵ See Wolter (1988:452-457).

In verse 17 the LXX⁸⁶ has extra word in the apparatus of the BHS (לַעֲבֹדָה). “To work”⁸⁷

1. MT. she girds her waist with strength and makes her arms resolute
2. LXX. Girding her lions strongly, she establishes her arms for work

The construction that is dated earlier is ideal, that makes the LXX reading the most likely to be the accepted text and hence the most suitable to convey the meaning that was intended (Archer 1974:61-62).

18

K טַעֲמָהּ כִּי־טוֹב סָחַרָהּ לֹא־יִכְבֶּה בַלַּיִל גְּרָה:

Q טַעֲמָהּ כִּי־טוֹב סָחַרָהּ לֹא־יִכְבֶּה בַלַּיְלָה גְּרָה:

Here also, we have the *Kethib-Qere* variant “in the night”⁸⁸ (בַּלַּיְלָה בַּלַּיִל) it is interesting that strangely the masculine singular variant was used instead of the feminine singular by the Masorates in the poem which is supposed to eulogies a woman. Most likely the scribe might have accidentally omitted the final ה. Beside this the next possible explanation could be, the scribe/author might have copied an original poem which was in the masculine and did not edit it completely into the feminine.

21

לֹא־תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשְׁלֵג כִּי כָל־בַּיְתָהּ לְבָשׁ שָׁנִים:

לֹא־תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשְׁלֵג כִּי כָל־בַּיְתָהּ לְבָשׁ שָׁנִי:

⁸⁶ αναζωοσαμένη ισχυρώς την οσφύν αυτής ήρεισε τους βραχίονας αυτής εις έργον (εις έργον).

⁸⁷ Koehler & Baumgartner (2000: 6700; 6716; 10934). It is Aramaic in origin, it is a feminine verb, it was used 140 times in the MT: (1) Work Ex 5:11; 6:6; Ps 104:23. (2) Service which is rendered Jos 22:27 Gen 30:26. (3) Service of worship: 1Chr 34:13; Num 4:47; Neh 10: 38.

⁸⁸ Brown, Drivers & Briggs (1968:538) prefers Q variant (feminine variant) to the K variant (masculine) which the Masoretes used and has therefore opted for that. Perhaps they concede that it might have been a mistake on the part of the scribe.

לֹא־תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשָּׁלֵג בִּי כָל־בֵּיתָהּ לְבָשׁ שָׁנִים :

There are two readings with the Hebrew and one with the Greek.⁸⁹ The apparatus added this note: “Several medieval manuscripts of Hebrew Bible such as Peshitta and Targums opted for שָׁנִי (nm)⁹⁰ Scarlet. “The LXX and the Vulgate c 400 have “double”⁹¹

1. MT. She does not fear the cold weather, because she gives her household double cloth (Warm clothing).
2. MT. She does not fear the cold weather, because she gives her household scarlet clothing (supposedly warm clothing?).
3. LXX. She does not worry about her husband’s household because all her house is cloth (with double goat’s hair coat).⁹²

It is most probable that the scribe intended to allude to double layered coat, meant to provide warmth for the household during the cold weather, that makes the first reading the most probable.

27

צוֹפִיָּה הַלֵּיכוֹת בֵּיתָהּ וְלֶחֶם עֲצָלוֹת לֹא תֹאכֶל:

⁸⁹ ου φροντίζει των εν οικω ο ανηρ αυτης οταν που χρονιζη παντες γαρ οι the ones παρ’ αυτης ενδεδυμένοι εισί δισσάς χλαίνας.

⁹⁰ Cf. Koehler & Baumgartner 2000:11199; Brown, Driver & Briggs 1907:1040; Gesenius, (1906:1116). The word could be a corruption of שָׁנִי of an Aramaic origin, שָׁנִי which means to change, pe. pf 3 mpl שָׁנִי Dan 3:27; Pt. Act Fs שָׁנִי Dan 7:19; masculine plural שָׁנִי Dan 5:9; fpl שָׁנִי Dan 7:3 -intransitive verb, be changed: of garment, by fire Dan 3:27. However, Austel 1980:942, insists that “the word which has been used forty-two times in the Old Testament means scarlet. This was a material dyed with a dye made out of the eggs of Kermes or cochineal scale insects which attached themselves to the Kermes oak. The dyed material (scarlet) is also connected with affluence and the priesthood in Israel. (cf. 2 Sam 1:24; Ex 26:1; 26:31; ephod Ex 28: 5-8 Ex 28:33. It was also used during purification ceremonies as in the cleansing of the leper (Lev 14: 4,6; Lev 14:49,52)”

⁹¹It is interesting that the LXX and Vulgate rendered it double using the Greek word δισσάς which corresponds with the Hebrew word שָׁנִי (מְשֻׁנָּה) and the Aramaic word שָׁנִי that means to change. It is possible that the poem was originally in Aramaic and when it was translated into Hebrew, some of the similar words with different meaning confused the scribe. This translation prefers the Aramaic word to the Hebrew word because majority of the words encountered so far seems to have Aramaic origin or are Aramaic.

⁹² Verse 22 in the LXX.

צופיה הליכות ביתה ולחם עֲצָלוֹת לֹא תֹאכַל:

The variant in this verse featured only once in Ezekiel 3:3 in a second person masculine singular, imperfect tense (shall eat) where the prophet was instructed “son of man you shall eat the scroll,” here again another variant that alludes to masculine gender for a poem that is supposed to eulogies a woman.

1. She watches over the affairs of her house and does not eat the bread of idleness
2. She watches over the affairs of her house and (s)he shall not eat the bread of idleness.

28

קָמוּ בְנֵיהָ וַיֵּאשְׁרוּהָ בְעֵלָהּ וַיְהִלְלָהּ:

קָדְמוּ בְנֵיהָ וַיֵּאשְׁרוּהָ בְעֵלָהּ וַיְהִלְלָהּ:

The two terms (קָדְמוּ קָמוּ)⁹³ are at best *hapax legomena*: their meaning is uncertain. Unless the search for meaning is extended to Aramaic.

The LXX reading⁹⁴ seems to make a lot of sense in this situation where there are terms whose meaning and origin are in doubts. (She raises up her children and they grow well/rich and her husband praises her).

30

⁹³ Cf. Harris, Archer & Waltke (1980:1067; Brown, Driver & Briggs 2000:2112); Koehler & Baumgartner (2000: 3482). The word is Aramaic and defined almost like the Hebrew preposition “before”; “to go before”; “to do in advance”; “to do early”; “to anticipate”; “to go to meet.” קָדַם קָדַם (LBH) Ezra 4:18; 4:32; 7:19;7:14 Dan 7:8; Dan 2:10;36. Further, the word used in Hebrew to designate “arise” “rising up” “standing up” etc is קוּם and not קָמוּ or קָדְמוּ how the commentators and the translators came by the translation rise up is unclear in verse 28. Even the Hebrew word for rise up קוּם originated from Old Aramaic (cf. BDB 2000:2131; Koehler, & Baumgartner, 2000:2351). It is possible that the poem was originally written in old Aramaic when קוּם meant to arise etc, and the scribe who copied might have misspelt the word קוּם as קָמוּ .

⁹⁴ ἀνέστησε τὰ τέκνα αὐτῆς καὶ ἐπλούτησαν καὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς ἠνεσεν αὐτήν.

שָׁקַר הַחֹזֵן וְהַבֶּל הַיִּפִּי אִשָּׁה יִרְאֵת יִהְיֶה הִיא תִתְהַלֵּל:

There are two readings in this verse, the MT and the LXX⁹⁵, the difference is in the presence of a word in the LXX⁹⁶ (discerning) which is not found in the MT.

1. MT: Outward appearance may be deceptive and temporarily but the woman who fears the Lord shall be praised.
2. LXX: Outward appearance maybe deceptive and temporarily but a discerning woman who fears the Lord shall be praised.

Conclusion

The Hebrew text of this poem is well preserved, there are no wide spread ambiguity in the passage which could hamper the smooth interpretation of the text. Words which cannot be found in the Hebrew are usually identified as Aramaic and, in some cases, have assisted the understanding of the text. It appears that the text might have had its origin in Aramaic and was either a male heroic poem which was adapted or translated into Hebrew to eulogise a woman or a formulaic poem. The presence of masculine variants in a poem supposed to praise a woman was very disconcerting.

3.3.5. Textual characteristics

A grammatical study normally examines the thought units of a communicative text. The study of a written document via its linguistic elements does not deal with independent words but words as they are organized in different groupings with one another. Here we are referring to the expressions and thought units that carries meaning. This is an attempt to recreate the mental processes that initiated and culminated into the written document (Hayes and Holladay 1987:59).

Words and phrases are studied with the help of some interpretive questions with which to explore the poem. The following are among the questions but are not limited to them:

⁹⁵ ψευδεῖς ἀρέσκειαι καὶ μάταιον κάλλος οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν σοὶ γυνή γὰρ συνετή εὐλογεῖται φόβον δε κυρίου αὐτὴ αἰνεῖτω.

⁹⁶ συνετή.

Does the word have meaning beyond the regular understanding of its usage? Are there some hidden meanings if so, why? What kind of written document are they usually used? Does it have a figurative meaning? Is it very common with a particular author or section of the Bible? Does this help create meaning for the passage and the book? (Hayes and Holladay 1987:62).

Some words are studied with the hope of finding out their origin and what could have been the purpose or intention for adding them to the poem of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. This section also investigates if these words have been used elsewhere in the Old Testament, and how they were used. Furthermore, investigation is done into if they belong to any literary groupings and how that can help us to understand the poem. Some scholars (cf. Wolters 1988:446-457; Szlos 2000:97-103) have done some initial study on some of these words and have given a head start for this study. Some of the words would be taken out of those studies done by those scholars and other commentators to help create meaning for this poem.

Ndoga (2014:176) adds that “the poem was written in the third person feminine singular in a descriptive mood where implicit statements are tactically used to draw out individual contemplations.” This coupled with the acrostic nature of the poem makes it a possible teaching aid for the youth and not necessarily a description of a human being. There are some internal evidences that alludes to the possible suggestion that this poem did not originate with the Hebrew culture.

The poem is filled with words that are usually used in military campaigns, hymns, psalms in praise of God and sometimes heroic men who do exploits. Here being used to describe a woman in performing mundane activities in highly cultic society that is believed to be patriarchal in its orientation. It makes the poem exceptional, and its usage of words discordant in the Hebrew’s scriptures.

The presence of terminology that are of Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH) and Aramaic could be suggestive of Aramaic influence on the writing of the poem. During the exilic and post-exilic periods, Aramaic was the official language in Babylonian and the Persian empires. It is therefore uncommon to find Aramaic words in their literary works produced around the period (Yoder 2001:24). Evidence of a text belonging to late epoch is the use of words

that are otherwise showed completely or principally in exilic and post-exilic biblical and extrabiblical text (Yoder 2001:20).

It must also be said that such a presence is not always due to the influence of Aramaic background or late Biblical Hebrew, but it could be that it has been produced in northern Hebrew tribe. Aramaic words were normally found in early poetry especially those of northern Hebrew origin and one must be cautious when using Aramaic to determine origin or dating of a text (Yoder 2001: 24).

Yoder (2001:25) suggests that “the use of feminine abstract substantive nouns with an וַת (Waw and teth) termination is morphologically suggestive of Aramaic influence. Majority of such nouns occur in exilic or post-exilic biblical texts. The word idleness or slothfulness in Proverbs 31:27 עֲצִלוּת could be typical example of such occurrence or influence. Also waw (ו) is commonly to mark original long ‘u’ like garment in Proverbs 31:22,25 לְבוּשׁ. Waw is used to mark long ‘o’ tongue in Proverbs 31:26 לְשׁוֹן masculine plural ending (*im*) is written with yod. The feminine plural ending in unaccented position is written in plane form זרעותיה her arm (31:17).”

The linguistic findings point to LBH vocabulary that were exclusive or predominantly exilic or post-exilic literature. What is more, the Aramaic that is found in the poem occur exclusively or predominately in official Aramaic, later Aramaic dialects and late biblical texts. This suggest that the presence of Aramaism and linguistic variance in the poem should not be attributed to early northern influence. But however, the influence of Aramaism on the poem remains evident (Yoder 2001:25-38).

Rhetoric is a discipline under the act of persuasion in public speaking. Most ancient writings were messages that were to be spoken to an audience. The science of how to advocate a position and defend or convince an audience or a reader of same was highly sought-after skill. Most of the books in the Bible were not different in their original mode of communication. However, this was not limited to spoken communication but also written messages since most of the messages in the Bible though were written, but were supposed to be read aloud (Hayes and Holladay 1987:74).

Rhetoric as discipline was taught as a course of study in schools, the following outline of five steps is suggested by Hayes and Holladay (1987:74):

1. Conceptualisation and the organization of the message and the strategy to be used to execute the desire goal are formulated.
2. The procedure- the arrangements of the constituent fragments to yield an operative piece.
3. Style -the selection of the resources and procedures for articulating the address
4. Memory- How the presenter can recall message.
5. Delivery- the medium the message (voice and mannerism) will be presented to the audience.

Here in a written document only the first three are applicable, however, with the text, which is a poem and was written as a complete alphabetic (Alefbet) acrostic, which means that each line begins with a successive Hebrew alphabet letter. The planning stage had to take into consideration how to get the special effect that should be associated with both poetry and acrostic. This requires careful planning in the choice of materials and the arrangements of the arguments that would be adduce in support of them (Jansen 2020:20,21; cf. Longman & Enns 2008:1).

3.4 Structure and outline

Most orators and “purposefully” written messages have used several structures to arrange their messages. The most common is the threefold arrangements: The introduction, the body or arguments and conclusion. This arrangement is very important to achieve the purpose of the message: To advocate a position or to persuade an audience. The author of the poem chose a rhetorical question as an opening statement which constitute the introduction of the poem (vv. 10-12): “An industrious wife who can find”? Thereby creating a great desire or some scarcity of such a rare gem.

This introduction (11-12), I guess was intended to arrest attention of the audience or the readers to want to know more about who that woman or a wife could be. Then the following statement raised the bar a notch higher by adding that such a woman or a wife is not cheap or common place. “She is esteemed far more than a precious stone.” Yet

still a third layer of the attention arresting device is employed in the introduction. Such a woman as a wife is a completely trusted personal assistant of the husband. Her desire is to protect her husband's interest no matter what happens. "Her spouse is rest assured of sufficient supply of provisions" "She does him good and no evil all the days of her life." Which man in his right senses will not desire such a woman or a wife as his companion. The author's introduction had the aim and the purpose of arresting the attention of the audience or the reader.

In the second section (vv. 13-27) is the body of the message, the author used as supporting material to substantiate his earlier assertion in the introduction. Verses 13-27 are the supporting arguments in favour of the exceptional wife. These includes, her weaving activities, most probable a cottage industry; her commercial skills of seeking the best and bargain prices cannot be overemphasized, and commendable: Verse 13: She seeks after wool and flax and enjoys working with her hands; verse 14: Like the merchant ships, she brings her bread from afar. She is a great manager of the affairs of the home by rising early and seeing to the welfare and of the inhabitants of her household and over see their work (v.15). Her activities cover entrepreneurship; disinterested benevolence; a devoted mother, a loving wife and a great counsellor among others.

The third section (vv. 28-31) of the text is the conclusion, which usually demands action from the audience. Here in the poem, the author summed up everything by the statement in verse 29, "Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all." Meaning whatever any woman or wife can do, she does it better. Hyperbole is a device in poetry which is meant to emphasise an argument to the levels of superlative. Then the author issues a disclaimer, these qualities are not necessarily physical beauty, a woman's ability to present herself as cultured or high-class lady. However, it has to do with those who fear the Lord. In verses 31 all and sundry are commanded to give her praise or show appreciation for her exemplary life.

The poem (Prov. 31:10-31) can be outlined as follows:

- I. Proverbs 31:10-12 could serve as the introduction, announcing the praise which is due the woman of valour:

10. "An industrious wife who can find? her worth is above precious stones."

11. "Her spouse is rest assured of sufficient supply of provisions."

12. "She does him good and not evil all the days of her life."

II. Proverbs 31:13-27: enumerates the heroic deeds of the exceptionally industrious wife: Enterprising, astute entrepreneur, liberal benefactor, helpful spouse and mother.

13. "She seeks after wool and flax and enjoys working with her hands."

14. "Like the merchant ships, she brings her bread from afar."

15. "She rises while it is still dark and apportion supplies and instructions to her household and her servants."

16. "She plans for a field and procures it; from the fruit of her hands, she plants vineyard."

17. "Girding her loins strongly, she establishes her arms for work."

18. "She enjoys working all night, because she recognizes the benefit of work. And her light does not go out in the night."

19. "she puts forth her hands on the distaff, and her palms hold firm to the spindle."

20. "She spreads out her palm to the humble one and puts forth her hands to the needy One."

21. "She does not fear the cold weather, because she gives her household warm clothing."

22. "She gives her husband warm cloths and a beautiful dress for herself."

23. "Her husband is respected among the elders of the town, when they meet at the gate."

24. "She makes and sells linen shirt and she produce loincloths for the Canaanites traffickers."

25. "Strength, honour and beauty she puts on and she rejoice in subsequent days."

26. "She opens her mouth with wisdom and the law of charity is on her tongue."

27. "She watches over the affairs of her house and does not eat the bread of idleness."

III. Proverbs 31:28-31 list the individuals and groups who are lined up to praise the woman of worth: Her husband, the reader or listeners are encouraged to praise her. Finally, her handy works are also encouraged to praise her.

28. "Her children grow well and her husband praise her."

29. "Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all."

30. "Outward appearance maybe deceptive and temporarily but the woman who fears the Lord shall be praised."

31. "Her deeds shall recommend her in the gates and shall be praised for the fruit of her hands."

The verb used in the command to praise her is *tenu* which is an imperative (cf. Van der Weiden 1970:155-156). This makes the hymnic nature of the text very interesting. It feeds into the allusion that the poem could have been an adaptation of heroic poem or of a divine nature. The injunction to all and sundry to acclaim her suggest the call to all beings to celebrate their maker in Psalms 101:6; Psalm 124:10 (Wolters 1988:450).

3.5 Detail analysis

Part I: Rarity or endearment? (Prov. 31:10-12).

3.5.1. Introduction

The first three verses (vv. 10-12) of the poem are designated as the introductory verses, here the author makes bold or audacious claims about the industrious woman the poem is about to portray. These unsubstantiated claims could be an attempt by the poet to create a longing or a desire to know more about the industrious woman.

3.5.2. Strength of character or physical strength (אשת חיל)? - 31:10.

There are those who argue that the meaning of חיל should be limited to strength of character to accommodate her feminine gender. However, the activities performed by the virtuous woman does not preclude her from any attribution of physical strength. It must also be said that the word has different meanings including, physical strength (Num

24:18), treasure (Job 20:15) integrity and strength of character (Gen 47:6; Ex 18:21). This word is usually associated with Proverbs 31:10; 29 Ruth 3:11 and Proverbs 12:4. These meanings could be attributes of the woman in the poem. However, the idea that she cannot be attributed with strength should be discarded. This is because throughout the poem she exhibited among many other qualities strength and strength of character. Ruth who was also described with the same words demonstrated purposefulness and strength of character (Ruth 3:11). She could simply be described as an exceptional woman who demonstrated unique characteristics (Van der Sluis 1980:94).

The *chayil* (חַיִל) has its etymology in Aramaic and could be interpreted in English as follows: Strength (Dan 3:20; 3:4; 4:11;5:7); Discomfort in the delivery of a baby (Ps 110:3); terror and discomfort (Ex 15:14, Jer 6:24; 22:23; 50:43; Num 4:9; Ps 48:7); the ability to engage in sexual activities: (Prov. 31:3; of a plant: Jl 2:22; of Stallion: Ps 33:17); to demonstrate strength: Num 24:18; Ruth 4:11; prosperity and Assets: to be rich Deuteronomy 8:18; farming skills (Gen 34:29; Num 31:9 Deut 18:17, Isa 18:4;10:14; Jer 15:3). Armed forces (Dan 3:20; Ex 14:4; Deut 11:4; Jer 32:2 Ezek 38:15; Ezek 17:17; 2 Kgs 6:14; I Chro 20:1; 2 Chr 26:13) (Koehler and Baumgartner 2000: 987-990)

The elementary understanding of the word in its verbal form is to be sturdy (firm) or resilient (strong) and it occurred two times in the Old Testament in this form. God's ways are firm (Ps 10:5) and the riches of the wicked will not last. (Job 20:21). Additionally, the basic understanding of the noun form of the word is 'might,' 'strength,' 'power,' 'able,' 'valiant,' 'virtuous' 'valour' 'army,' 'host,' 'forces,' 'riches,' 'substance,' 'wealth' et al. In all it occurred in its noun form 244 times in the Old Testament, as 'strength,' 'power' or 'might' 27 times it has been used as: of God (Ps 59:11); physical strength of a man (Eccl 10:10); or even of plant's life (Joel 2:22 see also Koehler and Baumgartner 2000:624).

As wealth is often related to power, *chayil* is thus used to mean wealth about thirty times, being translated 'wealth' 'riches' 'substance,' or 'goods' it may be the prosperity of a country Tyre (Ezek. 28:4-5); a person (Job 31:25); the unrighteous (Job 15:29); or from God (Deut. 8:18); 85 times *chayil* is used as an attribute of people it follows *ish* 'man' (valiant man) 2 Sam 17:10 and most often follow *gibbor* 'mighty' (man), 'mighty man' of valour, When the designation is used for a lady (Ruth 3:11 Prov. 12:4; 31:10) it is

interpreted as worthy but it may as well be that a female of this competence had all the characteristics of her male counterpart (Weber 1980:271, 272, 625).

Biwul (2013:281) states that the basic meaning of the word is as has been described above. However, "it is used here in its non-military sense as an attribute of the woman or wife. It appears this word is describing the ability, strength and moral worth of this woman or wife in her contribution to her family and to society." Hawkins (1996:14) opines that "physical strength and strength of character are both evident in the poem and should not be omitted from the understanding of the meaning of אשת חיל."

It is very ironic for a poem that is meant to eulogise a woman in a domestic and business venture has words which until this time, were used for mighty men who did exploit in war. Sometimes, these words were exclusively reserved for the description of God's (deity) dealings in human sphere. Such words lend credence to the suspicion that this poem could have been an adaptation from another poem or hymn which was in praise of heroic men or even hymns meant to praise God (deity) (cf. Wolters 1988:446-457; Szlos 2000:97-103).

3.5.3. Who can find (מי מצא)? - 31:10a.

Is this a question of scarcity, impossibility or just a rhetorical question of endearment? If the author meant writing to ascribe rarity, then right from the start the author's aim of writing the poem was defeated. This is because why bother anybody's peace with that which cannot be found ordinarily, why raise the hopes of a would-be groom if his chances of finding such a bride are very dim (Fox 2004b:1497; 2009:891 *contra* Yoder 2003:432; Whybray 1994a:426). The statement could be more of an endearment, desirability an end game for a would-be groom. A must have wife for a would-be husband. This view is corroborated by the rest of the poem, in that her worthiness is in her excellent complementary role that makes the family and the society better off. The stand one takes of this statement will influence how the role and function of the poem would be perceived. If the statement is seen as scarcity or impossibility, then the poem cannot be a didactic device for the teaching of girls and women, However, if it is seen as a statement of endearment, desirability then it could be suggested that the poem was written as a

didactic tool for the education of the Hebrew womanhood not as a manual for the would-be groom to find a suitable bride. On the other hand, the acrostic nature of the poem with its association to the best of womanhood in the Hebrew nation among many others, suggest that the poem was written as a didactic device for the Hebrew womanhood (Apple 2011:180; Biwul 2013:277).

Although Camp (1985:12) opines that the poem is a literary creation not about historic figure, however, such literary characters, though not real were born out of a historical situation which shaped and modelled the character in the literary creation. To this end it is possible to identify some traits of historical and sociological undertones in such literary pieces (see also Masenya 1995:61). As much as the character in the poem would not be associated with any historical figure in the history of the Hebrew nation, attempt would be made to identify the poem as an antithesis of the situation of the moral decay that was associated with the eighth century B.C.E, especially those social and moral corruption that was associated with the women of both Judah and Israel (cf. Oswalt 1986:141; Keil & Delitzsch 1996:93; Young 1965:160; Kaiser 1983: 84). The author of the poem might have written the poem as a teaching tool to school the women especially those who had returned from the exile to safe guard the reoccurrence of the moral and social decay prior to the Babylonia captivity. This is underscored by the fact that Hebrew poets and sages, just like their counter-parts in other cultures did not write from nothingness but were inspired by the occurrences of everyday life and especially major historical events (cf. Camp 1985:12 see also Masenya 1995:61).

In line with the general character of the entire book of Proverbs, as a didactic device, some scholars have suggested that the concluding poem in the book of Proverbs was done as a teaching aide for the up-and-coming generation. A closer look at the poem gives you the picture of purposefully written piece of summary of the theme of wisdom, within the context of everyday life in their homes and society. A woman of integrity, dedicated to family values, exceptional work ethics and disinterested benefactor to the under privileged and having assumed the culture of the post-exilic Persian woman (Koptak 2003:675; Yoder 2003:429).

In Proverbs 3:13-15 we read that “Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding; For her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot be compare with her” (cf. 18:22; 19:14). Proverbs 3:15 reads almost like Proverbs 31:10 of the poem of the virtuous woman, it could be argued that the whole poem of the virtuous woman is an ode to wisdom as a woman or the woman of the poem is being eulogies as an incarnate of wisdom whichever way it is, the author might have taken a cue from Proverbs 3 which is titled guidance for the young. If this is the case then we are dealing with personification of wisdom as a woman, this time as a married woman with children managing household and businesses. On the other hand, if we are dealing with the woman as an incarnate of wisdom then we are dealing with a metaphor in which case we cannot take her description on the face value (cf. Maier 2014:81).

Finally, who can find such a woman is the question that begs for an answer, if we consider that this was a didactic piece of literary work. It was written to project an image of a standard woman to the society, especially a society that has just returned from exile. Which was partly orchestrated by the moral and social decay of a certain epoch of their history which had their women being major players. The writer sought to create a new paradigm of womanhood by soliciting from them an endearment to that character. Such women may not be all over the place but they are expected to be the new normal of womanhood in the Hebrew nation (cf. Buzzell 1995:972; Yoder 2003:432; see also Biwul 2013:23; Scott 1971:86; Crook 1954:140; and Murphy 1981:82).

3.5.4. Her worth is above precious stone - 31:10b.

Very closely related to the statement of her endearment is the statement of the description of her worth, not a quotation of her value. Some scholars (Yoder 2003:432; *contra* Masenya 2001:141; Fox 2009:891) have sought to equate this statement to her selling price. Slaves and merchandise have a purchasing price but not a free born woman definitely not the virtuous woman of the poem. If she can be bought with money then she is not as special as we have been made to believe. I wish to reiterate that the poem was written as an antithesis for the behaviour of the women of Judah and Israel prior to the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, especially during the 8th century B.C.E. when Isaiah and

Amos ministered in the twin nations. Isaiah 3: 16-23 (cf. Amos 4:1; 6:1,4-6; Isa 3:13-23) had the cause to rebuke the women of the two nations for being overly interested in adornment of precious stones (cf. Keil & Delitzsch 1996:21). They seem to measure their worthiness in the amount of gold and other precious metals they had. Her worthiness according the author is far more than gold or any precious stone in other words she is not measured in these precious stones (cf. Prov. 3:15; 31:10b). Her worthiness as the subsequent verses will demonstrate is in her behaviour, her contribution to her family and society. The author never intended to equate her as an expensive upper-class woman. That would have defeated the didactic role of the poem. Because the middle and the lower-class women would have been excluded in the scope of the poem. Such a didactic tool, (an exclusive upper class) if there is, will be very rare in the Bible if not completely absent. The author sought to emphasise that her worthiness is not calculated in gold or any precious stone, unlike the women of the twin nations during the 8th century B.C.E., because she is far more worthy than that. She had a strength of character and dedication to family and society (cf. Klaus Koch 1983:105; see also Hill & Wilton 1996:417; Fox 2009:891).

As much as dowry is determined in most cultures by the social and economic status of the woman, they cannot be their price, and the author definitely could not have implied that. The author's aim in this poem was to elevate the conversation of women's value by showing her true worth in her character with her hands-on abilities (Fox 2009:892; *contra* Yoder 2003:432-433).

3.5.5. Sufficient supply of provision- 31:11.

The term לְשָׁלַח can be translated as 'booty,' 'plunder' or 'spoils'. Szlos (2000:102) states that "it occurred seventy-five times in the Hebrew scripture and in all they referred to 'plunder,' 'booty' or 'spoil' and all these words connote military imagery." Austel (1980:930) contends that "taking spoils or booty, was customary indeed. It was sometimes one of the principal motivations for going to war, and spoils consisted of women, children, cattle, and valuable goods." Further, it is argued that "military raids were sometimes ill-disguised plundering expeditions such as the ill-fated Amalekite raid against

Ziklag described in I Sam 30. This is direct military imagery in a poem meant to celebrate a virtuous woman.”

The word which was translated as sufficient supply of provision (לֶחֶם) could also be rendered plunder, spoils, or loot all of whom designate the proceeds of war or an exploitation of the powerful against the poor and the weak. It is most probable that the woman managed the resources given to her by the husband efficiently well that he does not need to worry about bringing more every now and then. This is contrary to the women of Samaria who were described by prophet Amos (4:1) as cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to (their) your husbands, bring wine, let us drink! This was a special breed of cows who were very difficult to manage, due to their demand for more feed and attention. The women of Samaria were so greedy to the extent that they were calling their men to bring them more plunder, loot or spoil to satisfy their insatiable wants. The men were pushed by their women to exploit the weak, the poor and the needy to satisfy them (Branch 2012:4).

It was estimated that in the year 2014, 48% of the world’s wealth was owned by 1% of the world population.⁹⁷ Greed is the greatest cause of resources imbalance in the world, very few people having the lion share of the world’s resource, the poor keep getting poorer while the rich keep getting richer. The virtuous woman in the poem managed the resource of her household so well that she did not need so much to maintain the home and she had enough surplus to redistribute to those who had need of them (Branch 2012:4).

3.5.6. She does him good and no evil all the days of her life - 31:12.

The language of poetry is different from that of prose, in that, the intensity of some of the words may have different interpretation or emphasis. It is allowed to exaggerate or to stress a certain point. Here we have a typical example of hyperbole in poetry (Longman III 2006:33), to drum home a certain point. It was not just enough to have said she was a good wife but to say she does him good and no evil all the days of her life is to place the woman in the realms of infallibility. But that is not the point - poetry uses intense language

⁹⁷ The global wealth survey shows that 48% of the world’s resource is owned by richest 1% in 2014; 50.4% owned by richest 1% in 2015; 54% owned by richest 1% in 2020 (Bruce-Lockhart 2015).

and must be read as such in other to make meaning of the message. Nonetheless, married women were measured in terms of their usefulness to their husbands so the poet was making the point that this woman is very useful to the husbands (cf. Majer 2014:80).

Part II: Her exceptional qualities (Prov. 31:13-27).

3.5.7. Introduction

The second part of the poem details with the particulars of the bold claims in the first section of the poem that makes her exceptional. Here the poet talks about her management of the home, her cottage industry and above all her business acumen. Verses 13; 19; 22 and 24 appears to deal with her industry (verses 13: she seeks after wool and flax and enjoy working with her hand; verse 19: she puts forth her hands on the distaff, and her palms hold firm to the spindle; verse 22: She gives her husband warm cloths and a beautiful dress for herself; verse 24: She makes and sells linen shirts and she produce loincloths for the Canaanites' traffickers). Almost all the particulars of her activities deal with the subject of her integrated textile industry. so, they will be dealt with together even though they are not arranged sequentially. Verses 15 and 18 seems to be dealing with the subject of how much time she dedicates to her work, and they will also be treated together. The rest of the verses in the second part⁹⁸ of the poem will be dealt with in their sequential order.

3.5.8. Integrated textile and garment industry - 31:13; 19; 22 and 24.

Culturally spinning and weaving were associated with womanhood among the societies in Ancient Near East (Claassens 2016:11-12; cf. Meyers 2013:133-135; Yoder 2003:436 see also Bird 1992:9479; Ackerman 2008:2) and did not constitute an extraordinary work for a woman to be involved in this industry. However, what is exceptional is for the industrious woman in the poem to integrate the processes in the value chain into an integrated industry from the sourcing of the raw materials to the finished products.

It appears verses 13; 19; 22 and 24 are related to the supply chain of the garment and clothing industry she operated. This could be described as an integrated textile industry,

⁹⁸ Verses 14, 16, 17, 20, 21, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31.

from the procurement of the raw materials for the manufacture of the thread, which in turn is used in making the textile, to the making and sale of the garments produced from her clothing industry. These verses should have been made to follow each other to give a sense of orderly thematic arrangement.

The textile industry has a considerable long supply chain whose management requires skill and expertise. Wool and flax⁹⁹ are basic in the supply chain of clothing and garment industry. It is most probable that she sourced her raw materials for the products of verses 24 from the wool and the flax. It appears she is a hands-on person in her cottage industry, working the wool and flax herself (spinning and weaving, tailoring or sewing of the fabric), very tedious and laborious process to produce the thread which is the raw materials for textile. It appears the verses 13; 19; 22 and 24 constitute the different sectors in her integrated textile and garment industry (Meyer 2011: 86-87). In verse 19 holding the distaff and spindle which are instruments for spinning and weaving processes in the textile industry, while verses 22 speaking about giving warm cloth to her husband, a by-product of the textile industry (cf. Bird 1992:9477). While she makes and sells linen garments to the Canaanite merchants. She seems to supply her finished products to her immediate household, local market, and the international market through the intermediaries of the Canaanites merchants (cf. Maier 2014;8; Hawkins 1999:20).

She managed the process of the textile and garment industry from the sourcing of the raw materials to the making and selling of the finished products. She could be described as an extraordinary entrepreneur whose economic activities helped her husband, her children, and the community. She utilized her time very well (Hawkins 1999:19), unlike the women and men of Zion and Samaria during the 8th century B.C.E. who cherished ease, feasting and idleness (Amos 6:1, 4). This acrostic poem suggests to the women and the men another image of Hebrew womanhood that needs emulation (*contra* Aitken 1986:158).

⁹⁹ This raw material was imported from Egypt to Palestine (cf. Yoder 2003:442).

3.5.9. Like the merchant ships, she brings her bread from afar - 31:14.

Poetry is a symbolic language that must be deciphered to make meaning of the author's intention (Longman 2006:33). Merchant ships unlike cruise ship moves from one trading post to another buying and selling goods and services. The virtuous woman is described as a merchant ship, it is most probable, she was not operating from one market. She was sourcing her food (goods) or supply from different markets and different farm gates to get her money's worth of goods and services. On the other hand, she could be sourcing her goods from distant markets or patronizing overseas delicacies for her family, making her family not living a subsistence way of life as Claassens and Yoder seem to suggest (cf. Claassens 2016:11; Yoder 2003:440; 442).

Here in this verse, it is evident that she does not operate from only one sphere of society; that is either the domestic or public. she had the liberty of venturing into the public arena and did brisk business without any restrictions on her movements or her activities. Neither did she face any threat to her safety during her business transactions as a woman operating in the public sphere. It does appear that the public and private divide is a creation of the industrial revolution and as a result a concept of modern society (cf. Claassens 2016:11).

3.5.10. Workaholic woman - 31:15,18.

The arrangement of the verses was not done sequentially according to thematic order, probably the author was more interested in getting the alphabetic acrostic properly arranged than the logical arrangement of the content of the poem (cf. Goldingay 2010:607). Verse 18 should have followed by verse 15 to read like: She enjoys working all night because she sees her work is profitable and her light does not go out in the night, (v.15) she rises while it is still dark and apportion supplies and instructions to her household and her servants. Once again, we have an intense poetic language on our hands trying to make a point by an over statement. The poet was using a metaphor of how lioness¹⁰⁰ rises while it is still night to hunt and provide prey for their little ones so also is the industrious woman who wakes up early to provide for her household. It does

¹⁰⁰ Some commentators and translations include "like a lioness" in their translation (cf. Waltke 2005:624; Fox 2009:894)

not mean that the woman deprived herself of sleep, but it could mean that she was deliberate and prompt in her decisions and activities. It must also be said that the metaphor about provisions (prey) could mean what is procured out of intense or arduous effort not extorting or stealing from others (Waltke 2005:634).

It is not humanly possible to always sleep very late in the night and at the same time rising up before the break of dawn. Cumulative sleep deficiency could have affected the quality of her life. Such manifest in constant irritability and general deterioration of health and concentration (cf. Claassens 2016:15; Waltke 2005:636).

This could literary mean she rises before dawn and starts her days work by first assigning responsibility to her assistance or servants. This is the only symbolism of her life which could be supposed as affluent status: The presence of servants in her household. Her leadership and multitasking skills appear to be excellent; she knows when to delegate responsibility and when to perform the task on her own. She is not a liability on her husband waiting for the husband to provide for her needs, rather, she is the bread winner of the family.

Obviously, the poet wanted to emphasize that she was not a sluggard as has been portrayed in Proverbs 6:6-11, “go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, which, having no captain, overseer, or ruler, provides her supplies in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest. O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to sleep. So shall your poverty come on you like a robber, and your need like an armed man.” The author was drumming the message of diligence to the audience. However, relaxation and regeneration are vital for normal bodily functions and they were culturally permissible at the time but absent in her life making her more of a superwoman (cf. Claassens 2016:15).

Poetic language allows such intense and exaggerated mode of expression to serve as an emphasis sometimes it could be figure of speech or an idiomatic expression. Her light does not go out in the night could mean several things depending on which of this mentioned literary device is at play here. If it is an idiomatic expression or a figure of speech then we could be looking for meaning in their socio-linguistic library. Waltke (2005:636) argues that it could mean she enjoyed permanent wealth or since sleeping in

darkness was a figure of speech for poverty among the Middle Eastern people. Which meant one is financially bankrupt having one's light not going out all night could also mean having enormous amount of wealth. Wealthy homes had their lights on throughout the night (cf. Prov. 13:19; 20:20; 24:20) (Waltke 2005:636; cf. Yoder 2003:436).

It is one thing to engage in businesses and another to make profit out of one's economic activities, however, the industrious woman in the poem is motivated by the fact that her trading is profitable and she is spurred to do more by staying up late. Carmody (1988:73; see Fox 2009:895) was spot on when she described the industrious wife as workhorse, competent and fecund. She undoubtedly would be 'a demon of energy' and the consequence of it is that she maintains her family's needs. She was simply a workaholic to the advantage of all, both her immediate household and the community at large.

3.5.11. She plans for a field and procures it; from the fruit of her hands, she plants a vineyard - 31:16.

Beside operating an integrated garments and textile industry, this exceptional woman is also involved in investment in land acquisition and possibly large commercial farming of vineyard. This is more of an investment after profit of a previous venture, possibly her garment and clothing industry. It is not uncommon to have a conglomerate but what is unusual is to have a woman who is both a wife and a mother in a typical traditional society like that of the Hebrew's being the manager of such ventures. She must have made a lot of profit from her industries: Clothing line and commercial farming. Her business acumen must be exceptional to be able to determine when and where to invest to increase profit. It is possible that the author had in mind a composite picture of all that is commendable in the Hebrew woman to satisfy all classes of women who may wish to tour a certain line of industry.

She is free to acquire property especially landed property and not only that, but also, she cultivates it without the assistance of her husband or any male relative. This is instructive and suggestive of either her own rights or the society in which she operated. Perhaps an era in the history of the Hebrews where a more liberal society might have influenced their social values. Where such liberties were allowed or such literature would be permitted to

circulate. Some commentators have suggested that this could be the time around the post-exilic Persian period (Yoder 2003:444).

3.5.12. Girding her loins strongly, she establishes her arms for work - 31:17.

The word *motnayim* (מֹתְנַיִם) can be demarcated as 'loins of her,' the word was used forty-seven times in the Hebrew Scripture. But in its present form (feminine singular) as found in Proverbs 31:17 is found only one time in the dual stem, what is more, in its usage of human body parts (*motnayim*) is in reference to the lower part of the back, that is the central portion of the body (Hamilton 1980:536). However, some commentator will rather opt for tendons or sinews instead of the physical translation of loins. *motnayim* is in reference to the strong muscles connecting the higher portion of the body with the lower portion and not loins as such (Job 40:16; see also Held 1965:395-406).

In some rear occasions *motnayim* is in reference to the reproductive organs of the human being and as a result a way of referring to one's off-springs (Gen 35:11; Job 40:16; 1 Kgs 8:10; 2 Chr 6:9). When it is used as such, it could be used interchangeable as *yarek* which is known to refer to loins as the seat or the power house of reproduction (Gen 46:26; Ex 1:5; Jdg 8:30). In simple terms it is the middle part of the body (Ezek. 47:4 Ezek. 1:27; 8:2; 1Kgs 2:5; 2 Kgs 1:8; Isa 11:5; Jer 13:1) where warriors suspend their weapon (2 Sam 20:8; Neh. 4:18; Isa 45:1 Ezek. 9:2-3,11). What is more, it is also use to refer to securing up the long lower attires around the middle of the body in preparation for running (1 Kgs 18: 46) (Hamilton 1980:536;537). In this regard when used in its symbolic terms like metaphor as the case in Jeremiah 1:17, it could mean one's preparation for an anticipated action such as when one girds up his or her loins with weapon means his or her readiness for battle. So, girding the loins with strength could mean strength to do a certain work (Prov. 31:17). In this sense the loins can be said to be pivot of activities (Schultz 1980:659).

The term *וַיִּצְרַם* could be translated as 'and strengthens', the root (צִרַם) has been rendered by KJV, ASV, and RSV similarly as 'be stout', 'strong', 'alert', 'bold', 'be solid', 'hard'. Feinberg (1980:53-54) outlined several derivatives of the root word, however, when used in the piel stem, especially in connection with various subjects, like physical strength, as

with the virtuous woman for her numerous household task. This use is found forty-one times in the Old Testament. It is also attested by the Ugaritic parallel, in the piel stem the verb can be rendered 'make firm' 'strengthen' 'secure' 'harden' (one' mind).

Van der Woude (1971a:242-244) argued that the root word has some synonyms: *hzq* 'zz and that the word is very prominent in the individual lament in Psalms and hymns especially with the synonyms (2 Sam 22:18; Ps 18:18; 142:7; 27: 14; 31:25; 89:22 Isa 41:10).

The term זרעוֹתֶיהָ is understood as 'arms of her'. Van der Woude (1971b:525) states that this word comes from the root זרע which could mean either sow or scatter a seed; the arm (forearm) and a unit of length. Van Groningen (1980:253) suggests that "the etymology of this root is not entirely clear, but it appears in Akkadian, Ugaritic, Arabic, Aramaic, and Ethiopic." However, זרע the plural is formed 19 times with a feminine and 4 times with the masculine ending. Van der Woude (1971b:526 cf. Van Groningen 1980:253) states that "the word has it's Biblical Aramaic equivalent as אַדְרָע in Ezra 4:23 דְרַע in Dan 2:32." Van der Woude (1971b:526) opines that, the masculine plural could sometimes be defined as a 'shoulders' (2 Kgs 9:24). In the cultic scope, may also mean the shoulder portion of the sacrificial animal (Num 6:19; Deut. 18:3). In the symbolic way the word represents the authoritative (Job 38:15; cf. 22:8) stout (Jer 48:25) and supportive (Ps 83:9) power, might of its owner. Van Groningen (1980:253) suggest that "in the plural, arms is equivalent to military or political forces or armies (Dan 11:15, 22, 31). Thus, to break the arms of an enemy is a figurative expression (1 Sam 2:31; Job 22 :9; 38:15 Ps 10:15, 37; Jer 48: 25; Ezek. 30:12-22 24-25) for destroying the enemy's strength, power, or violence and therefore their capacity to make war."

Van der Woude (1971b:526) continue by arguing that "in terms of its usage for irreverent, various literary *genres* employs anthropomorphically to describe the strong usually in hymns: Psalms 89: 14; 98:1; Exodus 15:16; In vows to praise: Psalms 71:19; Helpful: Psalms 44:4; 77:16; 79:11; 89:22; Isaiah 33:2; 40:11; Hosea 11:3. In Punitive, Isaiah 30:30. Might of God." Van Groningen (1980:253) using the word "anthropomorphically, insisted that it is used to represent the power of God. He cites Isaiah 30:30 as a typical

example of his assertion. It is also sometimes used in the act of creation: Jeremiah 32:17; deliverance of Israel from Egypt in Exodus 6:6; 15:16; Deuteronomy 4:4; 34; Psalm 77:15; Isaiah 66:12. The term has the tendency of connoting strength or force in its ordinary usage”.

Girding one’s loins with strength could mean she is armed with strength, this is because the phrase is most often used in figurative sense where one girds his loins with the tool or implement, he or she is about to use for action. If one is girded with a sword then the one is about to make war or ready for war (2 Sam 20:8). When one is girded with sackcloth it means the one is in the state of mourning like Genesis 37:34 (Szlos 2000:10).

This is the only time that loins have been used in relation to a woman in the Hebrew Bible. Yet another reason to describe this lady and the poem as exceptional, bringing back the argument that maybe it was not originally written with the woman in mind but was later adapted into the current state (Szlos 2000:102).

This verse seems to be at variance with verse 22 since the two verses seem to talk about different kinds of attires for her daily routine. At one time she is in a working gear suited to make her work easy, you can call it jumpsuit or an overall suit for work. Such will free her from the long train of dress which could get in the way of her work. In other words, she prepared herself for hard work (Schultz 1980:659). At what point does she wear her nicely made dress, which was described in verse 22? The poem does not portray a complete account of her lifestyle and any attempt to describe her life from this account would be fraught with difficulty.

3.5.13. She spreads out her palm to the humble one and puts forth her hands to the needy one - 31:20.

In Amos 4:1 and Isaiah 3:14-5 the inhabitants of both Judah and Israel were accused of plundering the poor and the needy while the princes took advantage of the people (cf. Branch 2012:4). It was a religious duty for the Hebrew person to show mercy to the less privileged in the society. Proverbs 19:17 “he who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and he will pay back what he has given” (cf. Isa 58:1-12) Taking advantage of the poor and the needy was a covenant violation for the people of Judah and Israel. The woman

in the poem showed kindness to the poor and the needy. By her show of mercy, she had performed a religious duty as a member of the covenant community.

3.5.14. She does not fear the cold weather, because she gives her household warm clothing - 31:21.

In this verse, we have another disputed text among the witnesses and subsequently translators and commentators. The controversy originates from the meaning of the word שָׁנִים with its Hebrew variants שָׁנִי and that of the LXX¹⁰¹ rendition. Some scholars argue that this term (שָׁנִים) which is supposed to be the plural of שָׁנִי could be a corruption of the term שָׁנִיא which has Aramaic origin. The term שָׁנִיא which means to change, in which it has שָׁנִי in piel perfect third person, masculine plural (Dan 3:27; feminine singular שָׁנִיָּא Dan 7:19; masculine plural שָׁנִיָּא Dan 5:9; fpl שָׁנִיָּא Dan7:3 -intransitive verb, be changed: of garment, by fire Dan 3:27). The word resembles the variant שָׁנִי Hebrew term for scarlet (Cf. Koehler & Baumgartner 2000:1199; Brown, Driver & Briggs 1906:1040; Gesenius 1906:1116).

This could be a case of “metathesis” an accidental or intentional change of words by a scribe (Waltke 1997:60). The same term שָׁנִים could also represent one thousand years (Brown, Driver & Briggs 2000: 2528) obviously there is something amiss with the word which calls for investigation. This is because the term שָׁנִים means “two or double” (Brown, Driver & Briggs 2000:2129), two of what: Pairs of coats? It is most probable that the scribe wanted to write two/double instead of scarlet. This could be an unintentional error on the part of the scribe (Waltke 1997:60) whereby instead of שָׁנִים he or she wrote שָׁנִים scarlet instead of two pairs of clothing (warm clothing).

This is because it makes a lot of sense to protect one’s family with extra clothing during extreme cold weather such as snow. This could be semantic variation of the LXX rendition

¹⁰¹ Δισσάς (שָׁנִים) - two or double.

of double or double layered goat skin coat for her family. There are no known protective or insulating properties of scarlet or crimson as a colour to be used as protection during extremely cold weather (cf. McKane 1970:669; Masenya 2004:105; Fox 2009:896). The writer probable wanted to say she gives her family double (two) coats or double layered coat, so she is not afraid of the cold weather. However, he/she might have confused words hence this discrepancy in the translation. Either due to the absence or missing of the alef at the end of the Aramaic word שניא (שני) which was taken to be שני which was mistaken as scarlet. Whichever way we conclude either as confusion of two Hebrew words, or an Aramaic word with another Hebrew word. It makes a lot of sense to have two/double or change of clothing for the protection of extremely cold weather than to say scarlet or crimson was given to the family to protect them from the cold weather (Cf. Fox 2009:896; Klein 1974:76).

Finally, the suggestion that this poem was written in synthetic parallelism early in this research, does not support the usage or the presence of scarlet as extending the meaning of the first half of the verse. In that the first line speaks about the provision she has made for her family against the anticipated cold weather. The second line is expected to give further and better particulars of her preparation for the cold weather and double layered coat or changings of same makes a lot more sense than scarlet.

3.5.15. Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land - 31:23.

The gate was where legal and administrative issues were dealt with as a council. It could be likened to executive and the legislative arms of government today (Deut. 22:1-9; 31:1-9 and 31:10-31; Amos 5:12; see Ndogo 2014:176; cf. Keil & Delitzsch 2002:47). What is more, it stood for the seat of authority of the community, perhaps before the establishment of the monarchy or during the post-exilic Persian period when there was no constituted monarchy (Waltke 2005:640).

The poem does not give a lot of information about the husband of the industrious woman. However, some information could be gleaned about him. There is a Hebrew word which can be translated as court (Beth din), which is simply means a council of leaders. The

group had the duty to interpret laws that were in disputes and settle disputes among citizens. It consisted eminent members of the community. There is contention over the criteria for composition of the membership of the committee or council in the community. Some historians have argued that there was at least more than one type of this council: Political and religious in nature (Saldarini 1996:971).

The religious council constituted by the operatives of the religion: The priests, scribes, teachers of the laws and traditions. The chief priest headed this group. They dealt with issues that were religious in nature on the other hand, there was another group which was basically political in nature and of jurisprudence. They had the burden of interpreting laws and settling disputes among citizens. They were usually composed of prominent citizens of the community. They were men of high repute and accomplished businessmen, academics, aristocrats, teachers of the law, scribes and the priests (Saldarini 1996:971-972; see also Unterman 1996:207). It must be noted that except for the priest, the scribes, and the teachers of the law all other members of the council were accomplished men in their fields of vocation.

The husband of the industrious woman by virtue of his membership in the council places him in a certain class of nobility or affluence. If he was not a priest or a scribe, then he could either be an accomplished businessman, an aristocrat, or an academic (teacher of the law, or philosopher). It is most probable that he was of a public officer in occupation (king, scribe, priest, doctor, nurse, or teacher of the law). This is because if he was a farmer or a businessman it would have rivalled or duplicated his wife's activities of which the writer would have mentioned. What is more, the endearment of the community to his family seems to suggest a certain public ownership of the family and not just a private member's family. His wife did most of the work, both public and domestic in support of the family, thereby releasing him to serve the community well. He had the peace of mind without any anxiety of his family not being cared for.

There must be a reason the Hebrew traditions recognize the husband of the industrious woman as a teacher of the law (Apple 2011:180). It is most probable that he was a teacher of the law, and, as a result, a member of the religious elite in the community. This section of the poem elucidates the verse 11 where it is said that her husband is assured of

sufficient provisions. Supply of such provisions was procured by the woman and not the man. This gave the man enough time to read, write and maybe make known his research findings on the torah and teach same to the youth and adults alike. The teacher of Torah in the Hebrew organogram is a position that is held in high esteem, it is equal to the sage the prophet and the king (Jer 18:18; cf. Prov. 22:17; 24:23; see also Ndogo 2014:174).

3.5.16. Strength, honour, and beauty she puts on and she rejoices in subsequent days - 31:25.

The term *ṣṣ* could be translated as 'might,' 'strength' or 'power'. Schultz (1980:659) opines that this "term is used primarily for deity, particularly in the Psalms. It is used synonymously with *chayil* meaning: 'Physical strength,' 'efficiency,' 'army'. *Koah* means: 'Strength,' 'power,' *g'bura* meaning 'strength,' 'might' particularly of warrior. Basically, the term (*ṣṣ*) is related to God's strength as an essential attribute of (God) his nature (Ps 62:11; 63:2); 'His voice' (Ps 68:33); 'His arm' (Isa 62:8; cf. Isa 51:9; Ps 89:10); are mighty. Van der Woude (1971c:1096-1100) argued that "the term found commonly in relationship with the strength and majesty of God in hymns and Psalms".

Schultz (1980:660) further explained that "the word is used figuratively to describe the security enjoyed by the righteous." "The Lord is a strong tower against the enemy" (Ps 61:3) and mighty rock. Psalm 62:7; "His name (person) is the strong tower in which the righteous are safe" (Prov. 18:10).

This makes the poem more interesting to have a word that is usually used for God being used for a human being and a woman to be precise, in highly cultic society like the Hebrew nation. It is surprising that it was not considered blasphemy. Unless the poem was not originally intended to describe a human exploit.

One wonders whether the mother of Lemuel spoke against beauty as praise worthy that is why a poem meant to eulogies a woman conspicuously avoided beauty as an attribute of her. This is not common in the Hebrew culture, in that women were usually described by their looks among other attributes (cf. Gen 12:11). However, we have a woman who is praised for her activities and her performance and not in the traditional womanly

qualities (Waltke 2005:627). This poem could be an attempt to shift the attention of women from their physical beauty to other attributes of their character instead of beauty and intellectual prowess which were the order of the day in the Ancient Near East (cf. Wolters1988:456, 457; Waltke 2005:627).

Some scholars have attributed strength and honour as royal or military attributes (Perdue 2000:274-276), which does not have bearing on mundane activities of maintaining the household and tilling the land to grow crops. There is no allusion to monarchy in the poem making these attributes ascribed to her as a woman of worth significant. Probably the settings of the poem were in a neighbourhood of royalty or a palace not in the land of the Hebrews but in a foreign land.

3.5.17. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue - 31:26.

Verses 26 reads “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue”. In this verse we have a synthetic parallelism with the first half of the verse being complemented by the second half of the verse. Making the wisdom referred to in the first half being about the teaching of kindness. So, the woman in the poem had a special gift of kindness and the teaching of it. In biblical parlance wisdom could mean a lot of things chief among them being crafty (1 Kgs 2:6-9); the ability to determine right from wrong (1Kgs 3:9,12); a sense of equity and fairness (1 Kgs 3:8-9); the ability to understand different kinds of knowledge (1 Kgs 5:9-14); the skill of mastering the writings and the established knowledge of other authorities (1 Kgs 5:12); finally, wisdom could also represent the skill and mental capacity to understand difficult issues (Job 39:16-17; Eccl 2:3) we can also add the wisdom of kindness (Prov. 31:26; 31:20; see also Gutstein 1999:36-37).

The woman of the poem did not only show kindness to the poor and the needy but she also taught about the wisdom of kindness to her household. She might have taught that taking advantage of the underprivilege was a violation of the covenant relation they have with their God. There was a time in their history where the women especially were

rebuked by prophets like Isaiah and Amos for taking advantage of the poor and the needy (Amos 4:1; Isa 3:13-15).

This verse makes the argument about the woman being an allegory of wisdom questionable (*contra* Gutstein 1999:36-39), in that, how can wisdom open her mouth with wisdom. She is wisdom herself and everything about her is wisdom. This poem cannot be an allegory of wisdom but most probable a literary creation meant to correct historic failings of the nation especially her women.

3.5.18. She watches over the affairs of her house and does not eat the bread of idleness - 31:27.

The verse seems to sum up all her activities as an overseer of her household which makes her very busy person (Waltke 2005:642). An extraordinary entrepreneur, astute manager, mother, wife, and disinterested benefactor of the less privileged in the society. One of the sins the prophets spoke against was idleness of the women of Samaria, they loved to feast and relax on ivory couches enjoying the sweat of the underprivileged (Amos 4:1; 6:1, 4, 5, 6). She had a cordial working relationship with her labourers or domestic staff, she treated them with respect and rewarded them fairly without exploiting them for her own gain. On the contrary the women of Samaria and Zion took advantage of the poor and the needy for personal gain. The woman of worth was a hands-on person who was actively involved in the affairs of the daily household chaos.

Part III: Universal acclamation (Prov. 31:28-31)

3.5.19. Introduction

The final section of the poem (vv. 28-31) is the conclusion which is usually a call for action, in this poem the call is directed to all those who had benefited from the activities of the industrious woman. The poet requested all and sundry to praise the industrious woman for her exemplary life.

3.5.20. Her children grow well and her husband praise her - 31:28.

There is substantial difference in the rendition of the MT and the LXX, while the former captures it as “her sons call her happy/blessed and her husband praise her” it is most probable that most commentators and translators have done conjectural emendation to arrive at her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her: (NRSV) Her children rise up and bless her; her husband *also*, and he praises her, saying (NASV). This is because in the MT there is בְּנֵיהָ a Hebrew word for “her sons”¹⁰² and not her children.¹⁰³ Also, the term for calling her happy or blessed by NRSV and NASV respectively is וַיִּאֲשְׁרוּהָ which has as its root אָשַׁר, which in qal (אָשַׁר) can be interpreted as 'go straight' 'advance'. When it is used in the piel it means to be called blessed (Gen 30:13; Mal 3:12,15; Job 29:11; Ps 72:17; Prov. 31:28; Song 6:9; see also Hamilton 1980: 80-81, 83)

However, there are two terms that could be used to denote blessedness: *barak* and *ashar*. Barak is used in connection with God’s act of blessing which does not require any prerequisite from the one receiving the blessing. On the other hand, *ashar* is reserved for man/human’s act of blessing another human. *Ashar* is applicable when one has performed a task and perform it well to be deserving of such approbation. *Ashar* is also used to describe envious desire. If we decide to settle with *ashar* as described above, then we must have an explanation for the possible implication of the sons being envious of their mother’s fame or glory (Brown, Driver & Briggs 2000:253).

There is no meaning for these terms קָדְמוֹ קָמוֹ in the Hebrew language except when we look further into the Aramaic cognate which does not help much except to say that the word is Aramaic and defined almost like the Hebrew preposition “before”; “to go before”; “to do in advance”; “to do early”; “to anticipate”; “to go to meet.” קָדְמוֹ קָדְמוֹ Ezra 4:18; 4:32; 7:19;7:14; Dan 7:8; Dan 2:10;36. Further, the word used in Hebrew to designate “arise”

¹⁰² The MT might have used sons to create a continuum between the vss. 1-9 and the vss. 10-31 where the mother of Lemuel admonished her son. On the other hand, the LXX does not have the two poems following after each other as it in the MT (Ndogo 2014:172).

¹⁰³ The LXX uses τα τέκνα αὐτῆς which is her children. Children is more gender inclusive than sons so children will be used instead of sons in the discussions.

“rising up” “standing up” etc is קום and not קמו or קדמו how the commentators and the translators came by the translation rise up is unclear in verse 28. Even the Hebrew word for rise up (קום) originated from Old Aramaic (cf. Brown, Driver & Briggs 2000:2131; Koehler, & Baumgartner, 2000:2351). It is possible that the poem was originally written in old Aramaic when קום meant to arise etc, and the scribe who copied might have misspelt the word קום as קמו. It is instructive, however, that in all the 13 times קמו was used in the MT it was translated or interpreted as ‘rose’ or ‘rise’ ‘rise up’ (Ex 10:23; Jos 3:16; Jdg 20:33; Ezek. 5:2; 2 Sam 1:32; 2 Kgs 14:4 Job 29:8; Ps 27:12; 54:3; 86:14; 109:28; Deut. 2:13 and Prov. 31:28). The context or the passage determined the tense used for the word.

When we put all together it is possible that the LXX rendition was what the author wanted to say “she raised her children well and her husband praised her” that is, if we look at the term (וַיִּשְׁרֶיהָ) from its basic meaning “go straight” and when used in its figurative (poetry) sense, we can say children are properly brought up, or she raised her sons properly (to go straight) (Fox 2009:913; cf. Carmody 1988:73). This is with the background that the husband is almost an absentee husband and father. Spending all his time with the elders at the gate attending to matters of state. In any case children have no business praising their parents or calling them happy and if they did, it should not be considered news worthy. On the other hand, when a man whose work takes him away from his family most of the times comes back home to find his children well brought up it is most probable that he would be happy and praise the wife for doing well even in his absence. This interpretation makes a lot of sense than to say that the sons rise up and call her happy or blessed and the husband praised her (cf. Fox 2009:898).

We have established that the poem is a synthetic parallelism where the second part of the line or verse must add to the information that will enhance the meaning of the first section. The children calling her happy or blessed and the husband praising her will be more of synonymous parallelism however the poem in general is more of synthetic parallelism than synonymous parallelism. Her children are brought up properly and her husband praises her.

3.5.21. Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all - 31:29.

In this verse the argument is made in support of the stand taken in verse 10 about whether it is easy or not to find a virtuous woman. Verse 29 emphasizes that there are many women who can be described as doing well but this woman is an exceptional situation. The author's intent was to create a sense of endearment and not rarity, so the initial statement of who can find must be put in the context that there are many such women but this industrious woman stands tall among them. She is supposed to be the first among the equals, head of the host not one of a kind. This deduction would be brought home to a reader if the acrostic poem is seen as both prescriptive and descriptive, teaching aide as well as setting the bench mark for standard Hebrew womanhood (Cf. Fox 2009:898).

3.5.22. Outward appearance maybe deceptive and temporarily, but the woman who fears the Lord shall be praised - 31:30.

The term for praised is used three times in the poem; in verse 28;30 and 31 (תִּתְהַלַּל וַיְהִלְלוּהָ) to mean “and he shall praise”, “she shall be praised” “and they shall praise her” respectively. The root word הָלַל (halal) is basically ‘to praise’ or ‘to boast,’ only in Piel, Pual and Hithpael stems (Coppes 1980:217). Coppes (1980:217-218) has outlined “three derivatives, הִלְלוּ (hillul) rejoicing, Praise; מְהַלֵּל (mahelal), Praise; תְּהִלָּה (t^ehilla), praise.” He opines that “the root connotes being sincerely and deeply thankful for and or satisfied in lauding a superior quality(ies) or great act(s) of object.” Coppes (1980:218) further insists that “the root can be used of exalting human beauty” (Gen 12:15; 2 Sam 14:25 or human understanding Prov. 12:8). The noun “t^ehilla” used of the renown of cities (Jer 48:2), also, halal “can bespeak the praise given to a good homemaker (Prov. 31:28,31), a wise diplomat (1 Kgs 20:11), which comes from a king” (Ps 63:11; cf. Coppes 1980:217-218). However, Coppes (1980:217-218) argued that “the root” typically, denotes praising a divinity, even false deities (Jdg 16:24). And that the most frequent use of the root relates to praising the God of Hebrew nation. “Nearly a third of such passages occurs in the Psalms. The largest number of these are imperative summons to praise” (Ps 10:21; 22:3; 22:22; 34:2; 35:18; 63:5; 69:30; 92:14-17; 106:1; 106:2; 109:1; 115:17; 119:175; 137:2;

145:1; 9:14; 145:2; 147:1; 147:7; 147:12; 148:1,2; 150:6; see also Coppes 1980:217-218).

There is a shift in the style of writing from synthetic parallelism to antithetic parallelism in this verse. Here instead of extending the meaning of the first line in the second, the second line seems to provide contrary opinion from the first line (cf. Waltke 2005:643, 644; see also Wolters 1988:448). This verse seems to be the first time the style of writing is changed, and from synthetic to antithetic parallelism. It is most probable that the author had at the beginning of the poem two different characters of women at the back of his/her mind. All the previous verses were one-sided argument in favour of the virtuous, but probable, unattractive woman and at the conclusion decided to compare the two. Either he/she wrote this poem to de-emphasize the way physical beauty was held in high esteem among the Hebrews and the Ancient Near Eastern cultures in general (See Fox 2009:898).

Here again there is a shift from “you” which was the husband addressing the wife in the previous verse, back to the third person’s stand point (Waltke 2005:643). This verse can be called the eye of the storm, it provides gleams of the author’s motive for writing the poem. The poem had an aim of projecting a new image of womanhood, one that is not overly concerned with looks and shape of the woman’s physique but her ability to manage home, make wise investments, raise well behaved children, empathise with the less privileged and enhance the image of her husband. As against the status quo, being seen by how beautiful or otherwise. A well-crafted didactic acrostic poem to change the paradigm of womanhood.

It will appear at the beginning of the poem that the author had gone to the court of public opinion ex-parte seeking to have judgement in favour of the virtuous woman. However, the history of the Hebrew nation, especially during the 8th century B.C.E. is replete with the image of overly self-conscious women. These women’s major concern were how they appeared in public decked with all sorts of ornaments and expensive attires. These women were unreasonably demanding of their husbands and took advantage of the poor and the needy in the society. They were lazy and loved leisure instead of hard work (cf. Isa 3:16-4:1; 3:13-15; 58:3; Amos 4:1-3; 6:1, 4-6;). The author/ editor/redactor might have

written his/her poem with this history as the background and as a result did not see the need to state the alternative to the virtuous woman. He/she might have brought in this exception in this verse when he/she was about to conclude the argument, to help his/her listeners to appreciate the difference.

The fear of the Lord forms an *inclusio* with 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; 31:30 suggesting some semblance of a purposefully written literary work. The theme is very common among the sages, prophets and the Deuteronomistic historians. The “fear of the Lord” is the beginning of wisdom. The woman has done all the praise worthy activities with the fear of the Lord as her guiding principle. It must be underscored that altruistic motives can motivate one to do such acts of diligent service to one’s family and community, however, this woman was motivated by the fear of the Lord, which is said to be the beginning of wisdom. So much has been said about the activities of the woman being mundane activities in highly cultic society. However, here in this verse the author made it clear that she has done all these as part of her religious duty and not just secular. Blurring the dichotomy between secular and religious divide, whatever one does whether mundane or cultic are defined by one’s religious philosophy (cf. Waltke 2005:644).

Some scholars have suggested that the fear of the Lord is a later emendation to give cultic flavour to a purely secular literary piece of work (cf. Crook 1954:137). In the next chapter another look would be given to the general editorial philosophy (why did the editor rearranged the book of Proverbs in the MT) and make some suggestions? However, it will suffice to say that the editor of the book of Proverbs might have had a new view of womanhood, leadership (kingship) cultic practices in mind as a guiding principle especially in the rearrangement of the content of the book at the second half of the book Proverbs in the MT.

3.5.23. Her deeds shall recommend her in the gates and she shall be
praised for the fruit of her Hands - 31:31.

This verse was written in synonymous parallelism (Waltke 2005:644), after contrasting the virtuous woman and the imaginary beautiful but immoral/irreligious and slothful woman in verse 30. The author now repeats in different words for emphasizes the praise

that is due the virtuous woman in the final verse. It is instructive why the author chooses to use different writing styles throughout except the last two. In this final verse she is a recipient of national award of merit for her contribution to the good of society.

“Do you see a man/woman who excels in his/her work? He/she will stand before kings; He/she will not stand before unknown men/women” (Prov. 22:29; gender inclusion mine). This poem was written as a literary piece to correct the historic failings of the Hebrew people, especially their women. It was crafted to embody all that is ideal in the Hebrew culture and as a result it was written to correspond to the teachings of the sages. The woman has excelled in her duties both domestic and business wise and she is now being recommended at the gates for her exceptional achievements. Her performance has brought her before the leaders of the land to receive recognition and maybe a place in the table of the elders.

There is also the issue of private and the public divide which some have argued that it sets the society into two classes of marginalized and the affluent (cf. Masenya 2004:112-114). However, the poem’s conclusion argues strongly to the contrarily, in a sense that whichever divide you find yourself if you excel in your duties, you will be recognize and operate in the other sphere.

3.5.24. Conclusion

Whether the author of the poem wrote about a historical figure or not, his/her work might have been influenced by a historic occurrence (cf. Camp 1985:12). This might have been among others, the social and moral decay which occurred in both Judah and Israel which culminated in the deportation and exile of the two sister nations. In this regard, the poem could be regarded as an antithesis of the 8th century B.C.E. prophetic oracle delivered by Isaiah and Amos against the women and sometimes the leadership of Jerusalem and Samaria. The author sought to give an object lesson to the faith community, of who a virtuous woman is expected to be.

3.6. *Sitz in der Literatur* (literary context)

3.6.1. Introduction

Now, the study is interested in the uses and functions of the passage in relations to the macro - literary units. In the opinion of Stuart (1984:28-29) the study sought to find out whether the passage (Prov. 31:10-31) “is part of a story or a literary grouping that has a discernible beginning, middle, and an end. Does it fill in, add on, introduce, bring to completion, or counterbalance the portion or book of which it is a part? Could this passage be placed elsewhere, or is it essential to its present context? What is more, does it add to the overall picture and what does the overall picture add to it”? Such a task does not elicit straightforward answers, but it calls for demonstration, this section investigated that.

The basis for the investigation was literary or verbal and thematic contacts. Verbal contacts are relationships that can be established based on the presence of similar vocabulary or synonyms. On the other hand, thematic contacts are the motifs in the poem that are found in the antecedent passage or in other parts of Proverbs. The research was done on two levels: In the immediate context, and in the context of the Proverbs.

3.6.2. Antecedent context

3.6.2.1. Verbal links between Proverbs 31:10-31 and 31:1-9.

It is curious to note that there are some few verbal links between the two adjoining passages or poems. However, most scholars consider Proverbs 31 as constituting two separate poems put together. The first half being the motherly advice of Lemuel’s mother (1-9) and the alphabetically arranged poem of the industrious woman (31:10-31). Notwithstanding, if you look closely at Proverbs 31, you would be impressed with evidence of a careful merger of two different poems by a redactor. This is seen with the presence of identical words and themes on both sides. It is also curious that there is no title between the two poems. Except for the change in the way the writer composed the message, which made the first part appear to be more of instruction while the second section more of a demonstration, the two poems were meant to be seen as different halves of the same coin (Ndogo 2014:172).

The suggested verbal links comprises: mother, woman, or women¹⁰⁴, presence of Aramaic words. Both poems have mothers playing important roles in the narrative, though in Proverbs 31:10-31 the word mother is not used, however, it is implied since she has children and her children were well taken care of. In Proverbs 31:1-9, a mother advising her son who is a king or a crowned prince about the dangers of leadership and how to avoid such pitfalls. Even though the son is the focus of the passage but the mother as a wise queen mother who is doing the act of counselling should be the theme of the poem. Some scholars (Goldingay 2010:608; *contra* Whybray 1994a:148) have argued that since there is no subheading between the two passages, it should be taken as the continuation of the previous poem. However, whether this assertion is true or not, both poems have as their centre piece a wise and dedicated mother. The industrious wife in Proverbs 31:10-31 is said to take good care of her children to the admiration of the husband. Without knowing who the husband of the industrious wife in the poem, one could guess if indeed the passage is a continuation from 31:1-9 or not. Then it will be safe to say that the antecedent passage had a mother advising her son about the characteristics of a good king. While the following poem, the characteristics of a good wife for a king. Both passages are linked by the actions of a mother both administering to their children.

The industrious woman is different from the mother of Lemuel in the first part of Proverbs 31. If indeed the second section was meant to be a continuation of the first, the author would have written it differently most probable, he/she would have used the terminologies of palace life. The two poems of Proverbs 31 are evidently separate and unique composition despite the presence of some few lexical and thematic similarities found in both poems (Apple 2011:179; Bridges 1981:619; cf. Farmer 1991:123; also, Atkinson 1996:167; Perdue 2000:274-275; Schwab 2009:654 and Hurowitz 2001:209). Further to this assertion Apple (2011:178) emphatically states that the mother in the second passage is not a royal queen. The passage is more likely to be an independent composition, a contrast to verses 1-9.

¹⁰⁴ Fox (2009:849) seems to suggest that women could also be classified as thematic in both pericopes.

Whether these passages are to be seen as belonging to the same narrative or not, the presence of the mother as the doer in both passages makes them flow from one to another.

While mothers are centre to both passages, there is also the presence of the subject of women/woman in both poems. While the Proverbs 31:1-9 the king is warned about giving his strength to women (promiscuous sexual life) as a king, in the second poem, there is an exceptional woman whose presence makes a man successful. Whether they were meant to serve as an antithesis or not, a balanced view is given about the effect of a woman in a man's life.

On the presence of many Aramaic words in both poems,¹⁰⁵ Aitken (2001:422) argues that (gives credence to the assertion that) both poems could have had a foreign origin or might have originated from the same source, probably Persian in origin.

3.6.2.2 Thematic links with both Proverbs 31:1-9 and 31:10-31.

Both passages advocate for kindness to the needy and the underprivileged in society. Lemuel's mother advised him in verses 8-9 to be the voice of the voiceless and give justice to the needy ones. In Proverbs 31:20 the Industrious wife is said to spread out her palm to the humble one and puts forth her hands to the needy ones.

Both passages seem to adopt rhetorical question in their discourses, in the antecedent passage, the mother of Lemuel in verse 4 asked "what my son?" This was meant to be rhetorical question, Whybray (1990:111) suggests that the king might have been involved in some misbehaviour which might have necessitated the mother's interjection. While in verse 10, the poet started the poem with "An industrious wife who can find?" Another rhetorical question which was not meant to suggest that such a woman is not available but to endear her to all prospective grooms.

Both Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31 are most likely the last to be added to the collection to form what we now know as the book of Proverbs. Most probably are around post-exilic

¹⁰⁵ Please refer to the textual criticism of the poem under study (Prov. 31:10-31), where the presence of many Aramaic words were discovered.

period. Notwithstanding the fact that some scholars disagree with dating different units of the book of Proverbs separately (Yoder 2001:18; *contra* Whybray 1994a:163-164)

The two adjoining passages (Prov. 31:1-9; 31:10-31) are well situated and complement each other in their attempt to instruct the next generation about what is required of a king and perhaps a wife of a noble man.

3.6.3. Proverbs 31:10-31 in the context of the whole book

This section is concerned with the placement of Proverbs 31:10-31 in the whole book of Proverbs. Most scholars agree about the nature and organization of the book of Proverbs. Estes (2005:215; see also Eissfeldt 1965:476 cf. Dillard and Longman 1994:236) points out that “both liberal and evangelical scholars have viewed the book of Proverbs as an anthology of sayings that originated with various authors.” The initial assertion that Solomon the wise king of Israel might have written all the content of the book is now nothing but a myth. However, they concede that some portions of the collection could have had their origin from Solomon. This realization is brought home with most of the collections having superscriptions which alludes to who their author was (Prov. 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 31:1; 31:1).

This notwithstanding, there seem to be deliberate editorial work which purposefully brought the collections to some degree of coherency. To this end, the various collections have been merged as a book. This section of the research is interested in finding out if the poem under study: Proverbs 31:10-31, fits into the collection, whether it adds on to the whole or not. Does it add or subtract from the book, whether it could fit any other place beside the epilogue or if its absence will take away something from the book.

3.6.4. Links between Proverbs 30-31:1-9 and 31:10-31

Fox (2009:849 see also Williams 1987:268) points out that the last two chapters, 30:1-33; 31:1-31 of the group can be delineated as four (30:1-9; 10-33 & 31:1-9; 10-31) closing add-ons. He argues convincingly, that, adding appendages to a manuscript was very popular and it is common in the Old Testament. He cited Deuteronomy 31:24-32:52; 33-34, also Leviticus 27, he insisted that it was added as an appendix just like Numbers 36 and Jeremiah 52.

With this, the four pericopes stand as a block at the end of the collection. They also share in their association with possible foreign authors who are both related to “Massa” in the northern Arabia, possibly descendants of Ishmael the son of Abraham the Patriarch.

3.6.5. Links between Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31.

The first nine chapters and the last chapter of Proverbs have been seen by most scholars as, deliberately placed strategically at both the beginning and the end of the collection to give the resemblance of unity. It has been described as an *inclusio* or a bridge to give the book some degree of coherency. These two sections (Prov. 1-9; 31:10-31) share the common theme of women being their main subject. Chapter 1-9 have both the woman wisdom and dame folly or a strange woman as their main theme. While 31:10-31 also has the Industrious wife as its main character. While the prologue seems to prescribe the right way of living, the epilogue describes what it means to adhere to the teachings of woman wisdom.

3.6.6. Links between Proverbs 10:1-22:16 and 31:10-31

Proverbs 10-22:16 is demarcated by most scholars as being a separate collection. In the anthology of wisdom otherwise called the book of Proverbs. It has a superscription of Solomon being the author of those wise sayings. Among other themes in this section of the book, what stands out are the issue of choice of wife for a young groom. This fact is demonstrated in Proverbs 12:4 it says that: “An excellent wife is a crown of her husband, but she who causes shame is like rotteness in his bones,” also the role of women in the marital home received attention. It is important to note that the sage or Solomon thought it wise that the choice of a wife is so important that a wrong wife could destroy a promising life of a young man. And as a result, the issue of a choice of a wife should be dealt with carefully In Proverbs 19:14, “houses and wealth are inherited from parents but a capable wife is from the Lord (cf. Clements 2003:465-466).

Without the inclusion of the poem (Prov. 31:10-31) in the collection what we have as the book of Proverbs, the book would have had an inconclusive end. This section of the book would have been without answer or a logical conclusion. However, we have a corresponding section in the poem to simulate or bring to life what a good wife looks like,

and what are the activities that makes her such a wife. If the poem was not added to the collection, otherwise, the book would have been incomplete and misogynistic. Most of the women figures who had appeared earlier and the part they have played in society had been characteristically negative. However, the poem recites the most eloquent oration of the best of womanhood. This gives the book a balanced outlook on life and the role and place of men and women in the family unit. Such a woman is presented as continuously industrious in managing the household's affairs (Prov. 31:14-16, 22, 24, 27; see also Buzzell 1985:972; cf. Clements 2003:465-466).

There is also a verbal link between the two sections of the book, with the Hebrew phrase *אִשֶּׁת חַיִל*. These words are mentioned in both sections of Proverbs 12:4; 31:10, 29. Except in Ruth 3:11, these words were not used anywhere else in the Old Testament. This alone establishes the linkage between the two sections of the book plainly. It is probable that the editor of the book intended the correspondence of both 12:4 and 31:10, 29. Whoever was meant as the exceptional wife is revealed in the final poem (Buzzell 1985:972; cf. Hawkins 1996:97-107).

3.6.7. Conclusion

The poem is well placed in the book of Proverbs and it serves as a fitting conclusion to all the teachings of lady wisdom and gives a balanced view of the role of women in marriage and society. The absence of the poem would have rendered the book of Proverbs inconclusive, and an attack on the female gender.

3.7. Sitz im Leben (historical setting)

3.7.1 Introduction

In this section an attempt is made to uncover the historical background of the Hebrew wisdom tradition and the poem, and its social location in their culture. This will include possible origin of the wisdom tradition, how it was disseminated among the people and its place in their culture. The household, the royal palaces, schools, and possibly foreign origin of the sapiential tradition of the Hebrew people.

The setting in life of a poem could be shrouded in a nebulous mystery. By their nature poems are written in a language different from that of a prose and as such laced with figures of speech and metaphors. However, in this poem understudy, there is no conclusive agreement about who the “industrious woman” is yet, whether she should be considered as real flesh and blood, historical personality, literary creation, or a mere allegory of either the church, Christ or Mary, the mother of Christ. Whichever way it may be, so long as the author situated the poem in a setting either real or an imaginary, the settings of the poem could be deduced. Jansen (2020:76; see also Perdue 2000:277) states that “the poem is basically set in the settings of a commercial text that deals with manufacture and sale of those items. Procreation, nurture, education, the court and features of the domestic affairs of a marriage life.” The household of this woman is made up of a husband, children and servants. Except for the concluding remarks of the husband, he was completely missing out in the whole affairs of the household.

Most scholars could not, over the years, come to terms with the poem as a hymn because it was in praise of a human being, and for that matter, a woman.¹⁰⁶ To this end, it is unimaginable to conceive that this poem could have originated in the cult of the Hebrew nation. “Especially, where there are, in the poem, several words which were reserved for divinity or God. No matter how extra-ordinary a person maybe, could not merit these words which were to commensurate the mighty works of God. This will amount to offending or breaking the first and second commandments (Ex 20:3-5) which prohibited them from making or worshiping another god beside the covenant God of the Hebrew nation. It is inconceivable that a Hebrew poet or hymnist would use phrases like *halel - yah* in praise of mere mortal.

Wolters (1988:456) opines that “the poem could have been a critique of the heroizing of women which was prevalent in the Ancient Near East” by arguing that: Conspicuously the poem of the industrious woman is an attempt to evaluate the literary works which were predominantly a tribute to womanhood in Ancient Near East. This *genre* of literary works was occupied with glorifying the physique of womanhood to the level of sexually explicit images. However, the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 was written with the

¹⁰⁶ Hanson (1984:330).

prevailing *genre* as a background. And it was written as an antithesis to this image of beauty and charm which were mainly set in the royal palaces and among the many wives and concubines of the monarchs. The image of the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 was painted in a background of everyday household and business activities with the fear of the Lord as her motivation for her good works. "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she is to be praised" (v. 30).

This, coupled with the fact that the poem has exhibited an orthographic feature which makes its origin somewhere in the exilic and post-exilic Persian period (Yoder 2001:35-37). It is most probable that the poem was a hymn of praise for a feminine hero or goddess on one hand, or an adaptation of a heroic poem of a mighty man around the time before or after the post-exilic Persian period, which was adapted as a polemic to catechize the Hebrew woman by a Hebrew scribe (possibly Ezra, Nehemiah, or Daniel)¹⁰⁷. This point is brought home forcefully when one factor in the argument that in the Septuagint translation, the phrase which describes the one as fearing the Lord, is not present¹⁰⁸ but rather an intelligent woman is rather present. Some scholars argue that this song might have been secular in its original form¹⁰⁹, with its life setting being an aristocratic or royal home in the exilic or post-exilic Persian period (Waltke & Diewart 1999a:308-309; see also Washington 1994:169; cf. Estes 2005:217) could be right in their assertion that the reference to an industrious woman (wife), whose sphere of influence spans across domestic, commerce and agricultural estates might have had the prime focus of her setting in the home, first and foremost and the community at large. Not a Hebrew home, the absence of righteous devotion in the course of the work day and at the beginning and end of the day are instructive to this suggestion.

The household could be the probable place of nurture of Hebrew wisdom tradition, this is because it was the primary place of teaching and nurture of the next generation. The father and the mother the first line of instructors before any other line of support such as teachers of the Torah. The Hebrew home was the centre of economic and family activities

¹⁰⁷ The preponderance of Aramaic and Hebrew words with Aramaic origin in the pericope makes it akin to the Aramaic portions of the Hebrew Scriptures. Most of these words can only be found either in Daniel or Ezra.

¹⁰⁸ Wolters (1988:157).

¹⁰⁹ Kuhl (1960:270).

(Perdue 2000:28, 29; see also Yoder 2001:59). In the household are several generations of family lineage spanning from great-grandfather, grandfather, father, and children four generations of progenitors. There were also uncles, aunts, cousins all living in compound of household making generation and transmission of wisdom a daily activity from one generation to another. These family unities were usually headed by the oldest male of the household whose duty was to teach customs and traditions to the family unit. The older female also performed the duty of guiding the children and the young ladies about what is expected of them by society (Perdue 2000:28-29).

The royal palaces could have contributed to this tradition especially with the attribution of the men of Hezekiah writing down the wisdom of Solomon (Prov. 25:1). However, since the monarchy was introduced later into the social fabric of the Hebrew community, its place and role in the development of wisdom tradition could be second fiddle to the household and the family unit. However, this does not in any way take away its possible role in systematizing and documenting the fledgling sapiential tradition of the Hebrew nation. This is underscored by the fact that the need for educated workers to Mann the bureaucracy necessitated the creation of schools to train this workforce and as a result created official scribes who might have helped in this regard. The kings were also portrayed as possessors and disseminators of wisdom (2 Sam 14:20;17; 1kgs 3-11). Proverbs is having some of these references which suggested that the palaces were centres of wisdom (1:1; 10:1; 25:1; 31:1). In all, the palaces and the schools could have played a major role in the creation, dissemination, and preservation of wisdom among the Hebrews. Proverbs 31:1-9 could be a typical instruction from a queen mother to a young monarch or prince. The fact that Solomon was lauded as being wiser than the wisdom of the east and Egypt could also allude to the fact that wisdom could have originated from the palace (1 Kgs 4:29-34; see Perdue 2000:30-33).

3.7.2. Dating the poem

The poem does not give any conclusive evidence internally that could be used to date its origin except some conjectural tell tales that are gleaned from the passage to suggest when it might have been written or redacted. Some scholars have used different tell tales to suggest the date of the poem, these includes but not limited to the following: Linguistics,

socioeconomic, thematic, structural, and biblical parallels (Yoder 2003:428). Some have also suggested the Achaemenian era for the writing of the poem (Perdue 2000:55-62; 275-276; see also Meinhold 1991:43-47, 76; Clifford 1999:1-3). Some of these tell tales (linguistics) would be discussed to ascertain the veracity or otherwise of the suggested dates of composition of the poem.

The presence of official Aramaic and late Aramaic dialects vocabulary in the poem has some significance in the determination of the date or the epoch of its creation. This is because it was the official language of the Babylonian and the Persian empires and as a result found its way somehow into the writings of the Hebrew writers of the time (cf. Yoder 2001:24, 31). It is evident from the textual study that the preponderance of Aramaic words is more than what can be described as isolated case and constitute enough grounds to warrant investigation into whether this could constitute attribution of the Babylonian and the Persian periods as influencing the poem and consequently being a product of the period. The writings of Daniel and Ezra are typical examples of this influence that can be ascribed to the linguistic influence of the prevailing language. These two books have beside Aramaic vocabulary, portions of their literature written in Aramaic.

The study of the text done in this research underscored that, the occurrence of the Aramaic terms was too frequent to be overlooked and such words were used only in Daniel and Ezra in most instances beside the poem of the Industrious lady. There were terms (קדמו or קמו) whose meanings were not clear and except emended into Aramaic words to decipher what the writer was trying to say. There are a lot of Hebrew words whose origin could be found in Aramaic in the poem. The Aramaic influence in the poem is too obvious to ignore and as a result must be considered in deciding the linguistic background to the dating of the poem. Without discounting the possibility of the northern influence on the poem giving rise to the preponderance of Aramaic words, this could be late post-exilic (5th century B.C.E.) Aramaic influences on the poem (cf. Yoder 2001:24-27).

There are no wide spread Greek words or loanwords to warrant investigation into the possibility of Hellenistic influence on the date of the composition of the poem. Whatever conjecture that could be attributed to the influence of Greek words could either be too

isolated or lacks merits. The association of צופיה with the Greek word¹¹⁰ (31:27) is problematic and isolated, making any attribution to Hellenistic influence obvious conjecture. All that has been said suggest 6th - 3rd century B.C.E. making a post-exilic Persian period most probable date of redaction or final editorial work (*contra* Wolters 1984:584-586; cf. Yoder 2001:32-38).

Externally it is most probable that the book of Proverbs or some parts of it was put together not before the 8th century B.C.E. and not later than the 200 B.C.E. This is because the superscription found in Proverbs 25:1 which attributed portions of the book to the men of King Hezekiah. While the oldest of the manuscripts: The LXX is dated around 2nd century B.C.E. which is far later than the post-exilic period. This is because the poem in question did not show any sign of the monarchy internally (Yoder 2001:15,16,18; see also Longman III 2006:28).

The absence of title and attribution to any historical figure also makes it difficult to date the poem. If we decide to consider Proverbs 31:1-31 as belonging together as a product of one author, we still have the problem of identifying who Lemuel was. However, the nature of the composition (an anthology) of the book of Proverbs makes the idea of date of composition problematic. Unless by date we are referring to the final editor's work or the work of the final redactor.

3.8. Synthesis

The poem is well preserved with few variants, which did not affect the intrinsic meaning of the poem, except for the suggestion that it could have had a masculine version of the same poem. The presence of the later Biblical Hebrew coupled with orthographic features which suggest the influence of Aramaisms, suggest a time which could be around the exilic or post-exilic period. This suggests that the poem could have originated around the exilic and post-exilic Persian period. However, the preponderance of the use of words which were hitherto reserved for God or a deity is most disconcerting. Suggesting that the poem might not have been written originally by a Hebrew poet.

¹¹⁰ σοφία (31:27).

The poem was written in a style that aids its memorization with the purpose of teaching all the roles and duties of a woman in the life of a man and the society.

The poem is well situated in the book of Proverbs, without the poem, the book of Proverbs would have been an incomplete project. It serves as a fitting conclusion to the whole book and belongs to the context of the collection. The editor purposefully put the poem where it is, as a conclusion of the manual for the search for wisdom incarnate as a woman of virtue.

It is most probable that the poem was written as an antithesis of the moral, religious, and social failures of the Hebrew nation around the 8th century B.C.E. This is because the poem seems to assume that its audience were aware of the opposite of the industrious woman and did not take the trouble to compare what it spoke against until verse 30 where it made mention of beauty and outward appearance which were the preoccupation of the women during the ministry of Isaiah and Amos. However, he/she has been contrasting the industrious woman all along with the picture of what they have known over the years.

In Proverbs 31:10-11, the author concluded that strength of character is worth more than the adornment of precious jewellery the women of Prophet Isaiah's days (Isa 3:16-23) were parading in the streets of Zion. This claim is supported by the subsequent verses where the author outlines the content of the character of the Industrious woman. Unlike the women and men of Zion and Samaria in Amos 6:1, 4, 5, 6 whose major preoccupation were to seek pleasure and relaxation, Proverbs 31:13-19 painted a portrait of a woman who is a symbol of hard work and a skilful business entrepreneur. Investing her profit in yet another venture to make more profit for herself and her family. Trading with local and foreign merchants just to give her family the best of both markets. Unlike the situation described in Isaiah 58:3 where the Hebrews thought their religious requirement was just an outward ceremony of fasting and praying, while exploiting their workers and seeking pleasure, the woman of the poem treated her domestic staff and household workers with dignity and respect (Prov. 31:15).

Amos 4:1 (cf. Isa 3:13-15) bemoaned the harsh treatment of the poor and the needy while Isaiah 58:6-7 equated treating their subordinates with respect and courtesy, extending a hand of benevolence to the poor and the needy as religious duty that was equivalent to

fasting and praying. The woman of Proverbs 31:20 extended a hand of benevolence to the poor and the needy in the society. Unlike the women of Samaria who demanded from their men more loot for their pleasure, the woman of the poem assures her husband of enough supply of provision for the household. What is more, she does not do all these back breaking activities and neglect her household, her own flesh and blood (Isa 58:7), rather she provides for her household as well (Prov. 31:21-23).

Unlike the fate that was awaiting the women of Zion and Samaria who were going to be taken away as captives through broken walls and with fish hooks (Amos 4:2-3; cf. Isa 3:24-26), the industrious woman will rejoice in the days to come with honour, dignity while teaching the law of kindness (Prov. 31:25-26). She will be honoured at the gate of the city with her husband for their contribution to the society.

It is most probable that Proverbs 31:10-31 was written as an antithesis of the historic failures of the women and men of the 8th century B.C.E. in Judah and Israel. The author had at the back of his or her mind the moral, religious, and social decay which precipitated into the Babylonian captivity and was contrasting the two situations with the hope that they will choose the latter. He/she was contrasting the strength of moral and religious character with outward adornment of jewellery: He or she compared flirtatious and tripling walk of the women of Zion and Samaria with hard work and industry, contrasted prudent management of household resources with wonton dissipation and gluttony of household resources. The poem compared the work environment of cordiality and respect as against disrespect and exploitation of labourers, disinterested benevolence against selfishness and greed. Honour and dignity with disgrace, captivity, and slavery.

If it is accepted that the poem could have been written or redacted around the post-exilic Persian period, then it will not be far-fetched if one suggests that whoever compose or redacted the poem might have been one of the leaders of the people, religious or political (Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, a priest, or other scribes). Who was concerned about what prevailed prior to the Babylonian captive and attempted didactically to school them out of such moral and religious bankruptcy to safeguard the repetition of the captivity and exile of the nation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Appropriation of Proverbs 31:10-31 and Akan women

4.1. Introduction

What is left at this stage of the study is to contextualize the information gathered so far using Proverbs 31:10-31 and the background of the Akan woman of Ghana. This exercise will appropriate research questions, the objectives and make conclusions. The possible reasons for the final editor of MT editorial policy are interrogated and make suggestions. The portrait of the industrious woman is compared with that of Esther, the Hebrew queen of the Persian kingdom. This exercise explores similarities and differences between the two women and make deductions about the possible similarity of identity. The Akan woman's context, especially proverbs, is brought against Proverbs 31:10-31 and Obaasima (the woman of worth) of the Akan is explored in comparisons with the industrious woman of the Proverbs 31:10-31 using liberation hermeneutics. However, before all these could be situated properly the concept of the industrious woman among the Hebrews must be synthesized to help situate the historicity or otherwise of the woman in Proverbs 31:10-31.

The historicity or otherwise of אִשָּׁה חַיִל in Proverbs 31:10-31 is dependent on whether she was, a figurative character or a real person who lived (cf. Dianzon 2003:51; Fox 2009:912). There are three schools of thoughts among the Hebrew tradition in relations with the identity of the woman. The first view sees the industrious woman of the poem as a representative of Hebrew womanhood in its entirety. The second concept of the identity of the woman is seen as the new model of a wife who is her husband's support and help; and finally, in the third concept she is a representation of wisdom, law, the soul, the day of rest, or Yahweh (Apple 2011:179-180; Fox 2009:950).

4.1.1. Representative of Hebrew womanhood.

The first concept of the industrious woman is supported by the Targum, who describes her as a devout lady; she is sometimes seen as enthusiastic and principled. While others designated her as accomplished and wealthy. Yet, there are still some who refer to her

as the best of motherhood. The LXX sees her as a smart lady. This school of thought insist that she is a composite of all that is good in the Hebrew womanhood (Apple 2011:179). This school of thought is advocating for a literary creation which brought together all that is good about their women-folk.

The acrostic nature of the poem seems to suggest that the text was purely a literary creation with a didactic purpose in mind. This was done with the hope of helping the future generation to memorize what is desirable and adorable about Hebrew womanhood. Proverbs 31:10-31 is the closing scene of the book of Proverbs, typical wisdom literature. The author (editor, redactor) might have had two purposes in mind: Creating a legendary figure as an object lesson and for religious purpose. This concept was meant to teach the Hebrew nation devotion to the family as a service to covenant community (Biwul 2013:275). Like the A B C (Alef, Beth, Gimmel) of the values of womanhood, a sharp contrast is created between foolish and a smart lady in Proverbs 2:16-19; 5:1-23; 6:24:29; 7:1-27; 9:1-2. The book of Proverbs is, therefore, a manual for individual and for community of learners to inculcate ethics and principles in everyday life (Scott 1982:3). This poem illustrates an unambiguous image of a lady of sterling character, a married woman, who has children of her own and who shows kindness to the needy and the poor in the society (Biwul 2013:276).

4.1.2. Husband's support and help.

The second view of the identity of the main character is the new image of a Hebrew wife. Whom every man should aspire for as a wife. The Hebrew intelligentsia tried to find a replica in some historic Hebrew women who were of great help to their husbands. The first is Sarah, the wife of patriarch Abraham, the second is Noah's wife, who supported her husband to save humanity from extinction in the deluge. Finally, also Esther the Hebrew queen in the Persian kingdom under Xerxes, who saved the Hebrew race from genocide and instituted Purim as a national feast. Here, there is no attempt to equate her with any historic figure but to see in her the best of Hebrew wife (Apple 2011:179).

Some Hebrew commentators insist that the portrait of the industrious woman is a historical figure, a real flesh and blood person. This stands they take against the mountain

of superlative qualities ascribed to her which make her a superhuman or even almost a divine personality (cf. Dianzon 2003:53; see also Masenya 2004:144). Masenya (2004:115) insists that all her Hebrew associates' belief that she was a real flesh and blood person who actually lived. Most of those scholars who have argued against a flesh and blood historic figure have done so based on the sheer quantum of her activities, which from all intent and purposes cannot be performed by a mere mortal without serious health consequence.

4.1.3. Representation of Wisdom, Law and the Sabbath.

The third concept of the three concepts among the Hebrew traditions is that she was the symbol of wisdom, law, the soul, the day of rest and Yahweh. This school of thought argues that she is the personification of all these concepts listed above, who are all feminine, except for God who is not feminine in the Hebrew language. The symbol of divine presence though, is seen as the female side of God. However, with the Torah as the woman of virtue, it is interesting since there are suggestions elsewhere that the woman was a symbol of wisdom and is associated with the Torah (cf. Fox 2009:905-906; see also Apple 2011:179).

Other scholars argue that the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31, could only be a personification of wisdom or an imaginary figure.¹¹¹ This is convincing if the poem is seen as activities performed in a typical day. The superlative nature with which her attributes were projected made her almost superhuman and sometime divine. Then, even Eve in her unfallen state would have been jealous of the industrious woman of the poem. It does appear that we cannot find any person who ever lived in the Hebrew history or elsewhere, with all these attributes. The poet might have created this perfect image as an antithesis of womanhood, motherhood, and wifehood out of the historic failings of the Hebrew

¹¹¹ Cf. Biwul (2013:276) and Koptak (2003:675). Koptak agrees that "the acrostic poem in Prov. 31:10-31, certainly was designed to persuade young men to seek a good wife, but we also see this woman as another embodiment of wisdom like the personifications of wisdom throughout the book. Koptak (2003:675) further argued."

womanhood (Isa 3:16-4:1; Amos 2; 6; cf. Camp 1985:12).¹¹² This is done with the hope of serving as a positive object lesson to teach future generations.

However, unless the poem was designed to be one act, or one scene drama in which case the woman was supposed to perform all the activities in one scene or one day (so to speak). If the average life expectancy of post-exilic middle to the high-class woman was seventy years (cf. Ps 90:10) and the average age of marriage was around eighteen years of age, then on the average an adult could have lived about fifty years of active life as an adult. In this span of time, she will contract marriage, consolidate her marriage, and home, and engage in different income generating activities at different points in time. She will have children; raise same, and eventually join her ancestors and she will be eulogised for a life well lived.¹¹³ If all these are put together in a poem of twenty-two verses, it will appear to be exaggerated and fictional (cf. Fox 2009:911-912; Murphy 1998:245).

4.1.4. Synthesis

If all these qualities are spread over life-time of seventy years with fifty of which are married adult life, it is possible for many diligent women to attain this height of success in all their endeavours. However, if the same is compressed into twenty-two verses of a poem without specifying the time duration, then it is impossible and highly exaggerated for one person to achieve all these qualities in a day. That said, there are many women doing more than what is expressed in the poem with or without servants to help them. What is more, not all the activities listed in 31:10-31 were daily routine such as buying land and cultivating the same (cf. Fox 2009:912). These are either one-off event or a seasonal task that does not have to be daily activities. However, since there is no record of a woman in the history of the Hebrew nation that has been known to have done all these activities, it is safe to conclude that she was a literary creation for a didactic purpose. Both the historic failures of the Hebrew nation might have inspired it, especially their women and the story of Esther the Hebrew queen of Persia.

¹¹² "From the start we are given a clue that somehow this poem is a summary of all that has been said about wisdom in Proverbs."

¹¹³ Some scholars following the initiative of Jouon have classified the poem as a funeral oration. They based their argument on some verbal forms that suggest that the person being spoken about was no longer living (cf. Dianzon 2003:53; Siegismund 2019:284).

Wisdom literature like that of the Old Testament is a product of reflection of societal experiences by those who observe life keenly. This could explain why this didactic poem was recited during programs that seem to centre around the best of Hebrew womanhood, at events like the Sabbath preparation on the eve of the sabbath, a marriage ceremony and a funeral of a virtuous woman. It was created with the hope of soliciting the best in womanhood among the Hebrew nation, and to avoid the pitfall of the women which contributed to their captivity and the Babylonian exile (cf. Camp 1985:12; see also Ryken 1984:128).

4.2. Why did the editor/ redactor rearrange the MT.

4.2.1. *Paratext* and the arrangement of Proverbs.

The literary context of a text largely affects its meaning. In the Hebrew Bible, where a book or a passage is located, is very important to its meaning. This situation belongs to what is termed as biblical *paratext*. Genette (1991:261-272) introduced this term to explain how an editor, redactor or an author could use the arrangement of paragraphs, headings, chapters, and even books to re-enforce the meaning he/she wants to convey to his/her audience (Goswell 2016:82; cf. Zucker 2018:173). It is therefore not surprising that in the Hebrew canon, the book of Proverbs is followed by the book of Ruth, the only time in the Hebrew Bible, the term virtuous woman is used to refer to a historic figure. The arrangement of the different collections in Proverbs could reveal the author/editor/redactor's motive for putting the collections together and the meaning he/she attaches to the location of each collection or section in the book. Such arrangements, apart from its ability to enhance the collective meaning of the passages in the environment, could be used as correction for the sequence and chronology of events.

A careful look at the book of Proverbs could reveal some covert meanings the editor might have had in the rearrangement of the second half of the book and in the general composition of the book. The following reasons could be deduced for the rearrangement of chapters from Proverbs 24:23-34 to 31:10-31: To re-enforce the general female imagery which was started in the first and second collections; and to correct the sequence

of events especially with the story of king Agur and the story of Lemuel and his mother (cf. Fox 2009: 849).

4.2.2. Female imagery.

Numerous scholars have attested to the female imagery in the book of Proverbs. The image of wisdom speaking as a woman, the image of a folly woman who is a trap to the young and inexperienced men, the image of a wife, mother, queen mother and a virtuous woman. Some scholars have isolated just three of these images: Motherhood, wife, and a strange woman (cf. Masenya 2004:88; Bird 1974:57). However, beside the fact that the book of Proverbs is full of images of women, it is significant that the first section of the book of Proverbs (1-9) had the image of wisdom personified as a woman and a strange woman. Both women trying to win the hearts and minds of the people, especially the youth. The Ancient Near Eastern and Hebrew contexts have been described as androcentric or patriarchal in their orientation. But, here in Proverbs the sages suggested in their composition and arrangement of the book that women could be the bedrock of society for good or evil. The society's well-being is based on the well-being of women. Why did the final editor or redactor begin the book as such? Was he or she trying to tell a certain story about the pivotal nature of women in their society? (cf. Masenya 2016:365).

The second section, Proverbs 10-24 deals with finding a wife and the significance of such an enterprise to the success or otherwise of a young man. Once again, the sages of the Hebrew nation have suggested in the arrangement of the book of Proverbs the significance of women in the micro unit of society; namely the family. The woman one marries determines the direction someone's life will go.

The epilogue of Proverbs is also about two exceptional women: One is a queen mother (Prov. 31:1-9) and the other is an exceptional wife (Prov. 31:10-31). The question that engages scholars is why did the editor of the Masoretic text bring the poem of Lemuel's mother before that of the virtuous woman? What was he trying to communicate, or what is it that he/she knows about the two poems that needed to be emphasized? It will not be farfetched to suggest that he/she was continuing with the general female imagery that had started the book. By bringing the two poems of female imagery together was to stress

the female theme of the book. It might also be a subtle suggestion to the reader that both could have had the same author or origin.

4.2.3. King Agur, Lemuel, and his mother.

It is meaningful to bring the two halves of the narrative of king Agur together to form one chapter. But why did the author/editor bring the stories of King Agur and Lemuel's mother to follow each other? Was he/she suggesting to the reader some commonality about these two chapters (Prov. 30-31). Some scholars have suggested that these two chapters could be of foreign origin and possibly have their settings in life (*Sitze im Leben*) from a palace of northern Arabia (Fox 2009:852). Is it possible that king Agur, Lemuel and his mother were related? Is it possible that Agur,¹¹⁴ the king, was an absentee king and his son, Lemuel, was a regent or caretaker king for his father, who was pursuing other interests abroad?¹¹⁵ It is most likely that the final editor of the book of Proverbs (MT) knew something about these two passages. Hence, his/her decision to bring the narratives together. Most likely these narratives could be related to the story of Daniel 5 (cf. Shea 1996:2; Anderson 1975:36-37; Haskell 1977:63-64). This is because it is possible that *Hamassa* could be related to *Hammath* in northern Arabia, one of the places where Nabonidus camped for many years (ten years) away from Babylon while still a king (cf. Sandowicz 2020:162,168-169).

¹¹⁴ There were some people, especially kings who had different names, Solomon was also known as Jedidiah, is it possible that Agur could have another name like Nabonidus and his son *Bel-shar-usur* (Belshazzar) in Daniel 5. So, could Lemuel be the same as Belshazzar?

¹¹⁵ There is a biblical story in the book of Daniel 5 where some commentators have alluded to as the story of Belshazzar. The king left his throne to his son as regent, and went about expedition while his son was involved in feasting. In this story when he was found wanting it was the queen mother who was at hand to direct and scold him for his recklessness as a king, (cf. Daniel 5:1-31 Proverbs 31:1-9) as synoptic passages. That king was known as Nabonidus 556-539 B.C.E. Some scholars describe him as the son of Nebuchadnezzar others see him as his son-in-law. Some few years into his reign he went to northern Arabia (Tyma and Hammath) leaving his son *Bel-shar-usur* (Belshazzar) on the throne: coruler. This leaves us with the queen mother as the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Anderson 1975: 36-37; Haskell 1977:63-64; Shea 1996:2; Sandowicz 2020:162). Those two chapters resembles the story of King Agur of Ha-Massa (cf. Hammath in northern Arabia where Nabonidus camped for many years), of northern Arabia and the Lemuel as a young regent who was misbehaving for his mother to give him the advice written in Proverbs 31:1-9 (see also Sandowicz 2020:169).

If it is established that both Hammath in the secular literature, the exile of Nabonidus, is the same as the Hamassa of Proverbs 30 and 31, then it will be yet another evidence in support of the historicity of king Agur, Lemuel and his supposed mother.

Scholars (cf. Fox 2009:852; Sandowicz 2020:166,169) agree that portions of the manuscript of Nabonidus and Proverbs 30, are damaged to the extent that sometimes it is very difficult to make a proper translation and interpretation of some of the words. In this light, the difference in Hammath and Hamassa could be due to damaged manuscript and as a result maybe the same.

4.3. Esther, the queen of Persia.

It is also possible that the woman in the poem of the industrious woman (Prov. 31:10-31) could be a wife of a Persian king.¹¹⁶ Paratext affords us the luxury of speculation about what was going on in the editors/redactor's mind when he or she reorganised the content of the book of Proverbs the way he or she did. Esther was a Hebrew lady who became the wife of a Persian king Ahasuerus (Xerxes), she became queen after the king's previous wife had disrespected him in public. It is worthy of note that this story was also set in the post-exilic Persian era (Dillard and Longman III 1994:197), just like Proverbs 31:10-31. Both the books of Esther and Proverbs are in the Writings; both did not have the name of God mentioned in the book (except the edited MT version of the poem). Esther became queen after an empire wide search for a replacement for the previous wife of the king, Queen Vasti. Esther needed permission before she could approach the king sitting in state. She had a lot of servants in waiting. We are still exploring why the editor brought these poems at the end of the book of Proverbs together. It has also baffled scholars how purely a non-Hebrew heroin could receive eulogies like the poem has done for the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31? Is it possible that the lady in the poem was the same lady of the Persian empire, of a Hebrew birth who rose to become a queen? It

¹¹⁶ The story in the book of Esther suggests that the wife could only visit the king by permission granted her by the king which means she did not have access to him all the time. Could Esther be that woman in (Prov. 31:10-31), this is because in the book of Esther the name of God or Yahweh is not mentioned while the poem in its original form did not have the mention of the word God or Yahweh.

is a historical fact that the Persian kingdom succeeded the Babylonian kingdom making them following each other consecutively and chronologically (cf. Graves 2013:31).

4.4. Conclusion

Beside the last two collections and the third collection the rest of the collections in the book of Proverbs were attributed to king Solomon: The first, second and the wisdom of Solomon collected by the men of Hezekiah respectively. These collections are about royalty and the aristocratic environment which also involved women as well as men. It is possible that the sages conceptualised their society in terms of the influence women had on their kings, the youth, and the society, as being the bedrock. Furthermore, it is possible that the final editor or redactor knew something about both the story of king Agur, the story of Lemuel and his mother. Hence, his/her decision to include them to follow one another, more so when scholars opine the foreign origin of both chapters.

4.5. Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in view of Esther's story.

4.5.1. Introduction

For several reasons, one alludes to the significance of placing the story of the virtuous woman at the end of the book of Proverbs. What is more, its position after the story of Lemuel's mother which I have suggested could be the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and the wife of Nabonidus in Daniel 5. The story of Esther is the most significant story of all Hebrew women, in that, she was not a wife of a patriarch who was fighting for her own rights and that of her son in family politics or was she a wife of a patriarch who chose sides in sibling rivalry and did not hesitate to go to the ends of the world to protect her favourite son. She was not a scheming wife in a polygamous marriage seeking to outwit her rival and sister for the favour of their common husband. This woman was not just a crafty woman, who out of her own wisdom saved her husband and her entire household from impending death and destruction. She has occupied the place of the only woman who, out of her courage and fortitude, risked her life to save the whole nation in exile. With this position she had no rival in the history of the Hebrew nation. To this day, the feast of Purim which was instituted to commemorate her singular act of courage and

wisdom is marked by the Hebrew nation (cf. Zucker 2018:171-179; Newman 2021:180-191).

Out of eight yearly feasts (cf. Lev 23:4-44) celebrated by the Hebrew nation, Esther has an enviable role in the eighth and only none religious feast, as the hero through whose instrumentality the nation was saved from a genocide by an imperial decree. Purim was commemorated in honour of the rescue of the Hebrew nation in Persia under king Ahasuerus. This was more of a secular festival commemorated on the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Adar (February or March; see also Standish & Standish 1991:75). If a Hebrew poet is mindful of projecting an image for her women to emulate, he/she may not look far from such a character. I have suggested earlier, while speculating about why the editor of MT might have brought the poem of the virtuous woman and that of the mother of Lemuel together, and why most scholars alluded to the fact that Proverbs 30-31 could have a foreign origin (cf. Fox 2009:852; Perdue 2000:251). It is therefore worthwhile to reread the story of Esther, the queen, against the background of the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10-31.

The book of Esther might have been composed around late Persian and early Greeks era of 400-200 B.C.E. (Zucker 2018:172). This book has been compared with several of the Old Testament narratives which include the story of Jacob and Esau; the story of Joseph; the Exodus account; Daniel's role in the Babylonian kingdom and Saul and Agag for similarities (cf. Finkelman 2022:10; Dillard & Longman III 1994:194 see also Zucker 2018:171). However, the coincidence of the two-accounts (Esther and Prov. 31:10-31) sharing too many similarities and contrast form yet another reason for this section of rereading the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31 with the story of Esther (cf. Zucker 2018:173). To start with the sheer disparity in the number of verses of 22 against the 163 (270 in LXX) verses of Proverbs 31:10-31 and the book of Esther respectively, the following are some of the cases in the two accounts sharing commonality: Both of the accounts have an aristocratic setting (cf. Masenya 1997:61; Dillard & Longman III 1994:191); in the story of Proverbs 31: She called her husband master (בַּצֵּל), in Esther she called her husband king. In both cases their husbands were not ordinary men (Masenya 1997:63; Perdue 2000:274; Esther 5:4). Both the poem and the narrative of Esther have their historicity in

doubt (Dillard & Longman III 1994:192; see also Zucker 2018:173; Kirkpatrick 1907: xiii). In the Hebrew Canon both Proverbs and the book of Esther are in the section called the 'Writings,' while in the Christian Old Testament, the book of Esther follows just after Nehemiah-Ezra, both in the historical section of the Hebrew Canon. These books are also post-exilic literature. Both the virtuous woman and the book of Esther do not mention God, Jerusalem, the Temple, Palestine, or any ordinance except fasting¹¹⁷ in the case of Esther. Nonetheless, the editorial works of MT included the name Yahweh in the case of Proverbs 31:10-31. Both accounts are anonymous¹¹⁸ and they are both presumed to portray idealized and improbable characters (cf. Zucker 2018:173-174; Kirkpatrick 1907: xiv). These are some of the coincidences that make it very difficult to resist the temptation to explore the two accounts for further similarities and differences to decipher who the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 was by rereading the poem of the virtuous woman with the story of Esther.

4.5.2. Outline of the book of Esther.

The content of the book of Esther might have the background around the time of King Xerxes or King Ahasuerus around the year 486-465 B.C.E. in Shushan, the capital of the Persian empire. Most probably it could be situated between the first voyage led by Zerubbabel 536 B.C.E. and the second trip to Jerusalem led by Ezra in 457 B.C.E. (Dillard & Longman III 1994:191).

The outline of the book comprises the following:¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Jones (2021:193) contra Newman (2021:181) insists that wearing sackcloth and fasting were common observances associated with mourning and broken heartedness in the Ancient Near East and could not be ascribed any religious piety.

¹¹⁸ Some scholars have suggested that the account of Esther could have been an official Persian record (cf. Kartoziyan 2012:1).

1. ¹¹⁹ A banquet organized by the Ahasuerus the king (1:1-2:18).

a. the host queen (Vasti) loses her office (chap 1).

b. A new queen (Esther) to replace the deposed queen (chap 2:1-18).

2. The banquet of Esther (2:19-7:10).

a. Assassination plan discovered by Mordecai (2:19-23).

b. The scheme of Haman (chap 3).

4.5.3. Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in view of Esther's story.

4.5.3.1. A virtuous woman who will find (31:10).

After the king fell out with his queen, a kingdom wide search for a replacement of the queen for the kingdom was proclaimed. This search lasted for four years and finally Esther emerged as the queen of the Persian kingdom. Several young ladies were involved in the contest to replace the deposed queen of the kingdom (Esther 1:3; 2:16). Each young contestant had twelve months of grooming to prepare them to audition as the queen (Esther 2:12). Finally, Esther emerged as the winner of the contest and was crowned as the Queen of Persia. The king commanded a great feast in honour of Esther and a holiday instituted in her name (Esther 2:18). He bestowed on her a great gift according to his kindness toward Esther (Esther 1-2). Zucker (2018: 174) argues that the root for “who can find (מצא) is found seven times in the book of Esther (Esther 5:8; 7:3; 8:5; 1:5; 4:16; 2:23; 6:2; see Zucker 2018:174). This verbal linkage between the two texts (Prov. 31:10-31 and the book of Esther) is interesting. This is because, it could suggest causality, that is, one of these passages might have influenced the creation of the other. What is more, this verb could be a motif or a clarion call which might have meant to rally the nation to a new dawn. In Proverbs 31:10, the poem for the ideal woman started with this “root” (מצא) who can find, this time not a wife for a king but a wife for every prospective husband in

c. Esther is asked to help (chap 4).

d. Esther's first feast (5:1-8).

e. King Xerxes insomnia (5:9-6:14).

f. The second feast of Esther (7).

3. Feast of Purim (chaps 8-10).

a. King Xerxes decree on behalf of the Hebrews (chap 8).

b. The creation of the feast of Purim (chap 9).

c. Elevation of Mordechai (chap 10).

the Hebrew nation. Most probably, the story of Esther, the Hebrew queen of Persia, might have influenced the writing of the poem (Prov. 31:10-31) or vice versa.

4.5.3.2. “Her spouse is assured of sufficient supply of provisions” (31:11).

Both texts use the word ‘lord’ or ‘master’ instead of *ish*, (man or husband); first when the king made a decree that everyman should be a master of his house after Vashti’s rebellion and in the description of their husbands. Again, the two stories have as their main feature the relationship between husband and wife, Ahasuerus and Vashti, Ahasuerus and Esther, Haman and Zeresh and finally, the virtuous woman and her husband. Just like the husband of the virtuous woman, Ahasuerus trusted Esther to the extent of giving her the royal signet ring to issue any letter to counteract the earlier decree to destroy the Hebrews (Esther 4:17; see Zucker 2018:174).

The industrious woman had the trust of her husband (Prov. 31:11) to the extent that he left the entire management of the household into her care including the upbringing of their children. She executed her task so well to the admiration of all including her husband. It is evident that Esther and the industrious woman had the trust of their respective husbands and a cordial relationship with their spouses.

4.5.3.3. “She does him good and not evil all the days of her life” (31:12).

Queen Vasti disrespected the king and brought his honour publicly into disrepute (Esther 1:10, 11, 12). This singular act had the potential of eliciting similar behaviour from the courtiers and the princes of the kingdom. The princes and the nobles collectively feared that this behaviour could be emulated by their wives and subjects. Therefore, they felt collectively disrespected by the action of the queen and needed to redeem their image or risk spousal insubordination (Esther 1:15-22). Unlike Vasti, Esther guarded the king’s image and interest jealously and did not do anything to bring the king’s honour and image into public disrepute. She addressed the king as the ‘king’ and not as ‘my husband’ (Esther 5:4). The virtuous woman called her husband ‘my master’ a sign of respect for her husband (Prov. 31:12). Again, through Mordechai, Esther revealed to the king the plan by some of his functionaries to assassinate him. This plot was an insider operation

and was likely to have succeeded if Esther had not revealed it to the king (Esther 2:22; cf. Zucker 2018:175).

The industrious woman created a conducive environment for the success of her husband by not being too extravagant (Prov. 31:12), by involving herself in profit making ventures which gave the family some comfort and financial security. All these activities including her personal comportment gave the husband the peace of mind and the time to concentrate on his profession. The two women share similarity in their support for their husbands and protect their interest by not allowing any harm to come to them.

4.4.3.4. “She rises while it is still dark and apportion supplies and instructions to her household and her servants” (31:15).

Esther had many servants who attended to her, it is obvious from the account of the story that there were women’s quarters and probably men’s quarters (Esther 2:9, 13). Probably the women’s quarters were shared with children if any. She might have great working relationships with her servants and the ladies in waiting. She also had male servants in form of eunuchs who attended to her. These were highly trained and skilled men who attended to the queens (Esther 4:4), just like the virtuous woman (Prov. 31:15) who also had male and female servants. What is more, whose husband does not seem to be part of their day-to-day life in the household.

Here again, the lives of the two women seems to intersect in their dealing with their domestic staff and servants. A life of affluence in what can be described as an aristocrat environment. The Industrious woman had her husband at the gates of the community (Prov. 31:23), what could be described as government machinery or legislative arm of government. Such a spouse surely might have enjoyed some privileges and benefits of the society.

4.5.3.5. “She spreads out her palm to the humble one and puts forth her hands to the needy one” (31:20).

It was not customary for the queen to appear before the king uninvited. If someone does that, the king had to indicate by holding out the sceptre to the fellow as a sign of acceptance or welcome (Esther 4:11). It is most probable that similar courtesies were accorded the queen by ordinary citizens and the women of the realm. However, it could be that the virtuous woman, putting forth her hands to the needy ones, was a sign of giving unfettered access to her presence by the less privileged in the society.

Here also, the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 and the story of Esther the queen, demonstrate that they did not live for themselves and their immediate families, however, they carried the burden of those who could not help themselves in their society (Prov. 31:20). By extending hands of charity to the needy and the poor.

4.5.3.6. “Her husband is respected among the elders of the town, when they meet at the gate” (31:23).

The two stories have a contrast that seems to balance the equation for the couple in the relationship. In the story of Esther, she achieved her glory partly due to her marriage to the king as the husband while she was respected and celebrated among the Hebrews, while the husband of the virtuous woman was praised for the sake of his wife at the gate of the community.

4.5.3.7. “She opens her mouth with wisdom and the law of charity is on her tongue” (31:26).

When Esther was faced with possible genocide of her people, she could have absolved herself from any harm (Esther 3:8-15). After all, she was the queen and no harm could come to her except authorized by the king himself. More so, no one, except Mordechai knew of her Hebrew identity. Even though she was elevated as a queen of the whole realm, she brought herself to the level of ordinary Hebrew people and owned the threat. She did not confront the threat head on without careful plan and preparation, a testimony

to her sagacity. Who would have expected a highly placed woman inviting the man who plan to kill her people to a banquet with the king? In her planning, she demonstrated faith in her God even though His name was not mentioned. In wisdom she went about inviting the king and the conspirator to a banquet and finally, she demonstrated courage, when she approached the king uninvited (Esther 4:15-5:1-8).

The industrious woman had a certain level of affluence and financial security and could have contended herself with her family's well-being and allowed society to take care of the needy. However, she supported the disadvantaged members of the society by her own means. There is no record in the poem about the woman ever saying anything worthy of being described as wise saying. What is more, in the book of Esther, she is not recorded to have said anything that could be described as opening her mouth with wisdom.

4.5.3.8. "She watches over the affairs of her house and does not eat the bread of idleness" (31:27).

When Esther was informed about the plot of Haman, she was also told by Mordechai that she had attained the height of the queen for the purpose of using same to save her people (Esther 4:13,14). Esther like the virtuous woman worked for the benefits of her people the Hebrew nation. Her singular duty was to save and protect her people. Both women were literally watching over the affairs of their houses.

However, the virtuous woman works all day and all night without any known rest for relaxation and rejuvenation. Some scholars have described her as "demon of energy" (Carmody 1988:73), because of her workaholic tendency on the other hand, Esther combines work with pleasure and she uses food and drink to bait her allies and foes alike. For twice she invited both the king and Haman to attend a banquet at her quarters. When the genocide was foiled, she organized and instituted a feast in honour of the feat which was known for excessive eating and drinking for two days (Jones 2021:193). It is refreshing to note that where the two figures differ the differences are those that complement the activities of the other, what one will call the different sides of the same coin.

4.5.3.9. “Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all” (31:29).

To replace the deposed queen, young and beautiful women were gathered in Shushan, the capital of the kingdom, for grooming and audition (Esther 2:12). “Each young woman’s turn came to go in to king Ahasuerus after she had completed twelve months’ preparation, according to the regulations for the women, for this were the days of their preparation apportioned: Six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with perfumes and preparations for beautifying women.” Esther 12:13 states that “this prepared, each young woman went to the king, and she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the women’s quarters to the king’s palace.” The competition took not less than four years to complete, and it was a keenly contested exercise which included all the eligible young ladies in the kingdom and Esther emerged the winner. She was crowned queen of the empire.

The introduction (31:10) of the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31 seems to re-enact the act of searching for the replacement of the queen in the Persian kingdom. When it started with a statement “virtuous woman who can find,” this could imply her importance or scarcity. However, it is most probable that the statement is that of endearment. Emphasizing that finding a virtuous woman is the height of a man’s life goals. There are many equally good women around but the one who is her husband’s support is not that which can be attained without strenuous search.

4.5.3.10. “Outward appearance maybe deceptive and temporarily but the woman who fears the Lord shall be praised” (31:30).

Here, the contrast between the two ladies is more pronounced, one attained fame and elevation due to her beauty and favour, while the other is said to do well without same. Esther 2:9 reads “Now the young woman pleased him, and she obtained his favour; so, he readily gave beauty preparation to her, besides her allowance. Then seven choice maidservants were provided for her from the king’s palace, and he moved her and her maidservants to the best place in the house of the women.” Not only this but also, in verse 15 it is said that “she obtained favour in the sight of all who saw her.” It can also be assumed that she was beautiful because the basic requirement of enrolment into the contest was beauty. In Esther 2:2 the king was advised to organize a contest of all the

beautiful young ladies in the kingdom and out of them selected replacement for Vashti as a queen. "Then the king's servants said: Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king." Esther was beautiful and arose to fame and substance out of abundance of favour she received from the king's palace.

On the other hand, the virtuous woman might not have had either beauty or favour. It could be assumed that she was not beautiful and as a result had little or no favour from all who saw her. She might have achieved all her successes by dint of hard work, out of the sweat of her brow. The author of Proverbs might have sought to emphasise that one does not need beauty and favour to succeed in life. Or the returns of favour and beauty are short lived, but what one achieves with hard work endures. Whatever was meant by the statement "outward appearance maybe deceptive and temporarily" did not include enduring praise as those who reverent the covenant God of the Hebrew nation.

The next issue of contrast in the two literary works is the aspect of the presence or absence of God's name mentioned in the two stories. Most scholars argue that the virtuous woman originally did not have the statement "the fear of God" in the poem and could be the work of an editor or redactor who might have included the phrase to make it acceptable to the cultic community (cf. Jones 2021:193). Whatever the reason or whether it was originally present or a product of editorial activities, it was not an act of cultic piety on the part of the woman, but an observer's or a third person's observation. In other words, there was no act of acknowledgement of the benevolence of God or supplication in the story (cf. Crook 1954:137). It was a third person, possibly an observer's comment about what might have contributed to the woman's success.

Let us assume the presence of the statement "the woman who fears the Lord shall be praised" as part of the story of the woman of virtue. However, there was no act of acknowledgement of God in her daily life and activities. While on the other hand there was no mention of God in the story of Esther and yet she was involved in, and encouraged others to join in supplication to God for favour (Esther 4:16). Some commentators (Jones 2021:193) have argued that the wearing of sackcloth and fasting were acts of religious piety, however, these activities were not exclusive to religious or cultic activity. Wearing sackcloth and fasting were acts of mourning among the people of the Ancient Near East

(Newman 2021:181). What is more, fasting could have at least three significant aspects among different cultures and societies. It could be for health and medical purpose, for mourning and contrition of heart and finally for prayer or supplication (Jones 2021:193; *contra* Newman 2021:181).

4.5.3.11. “Her deeds shall recommend her in the gates and shall be praised for the fruit of her hands” (31:31).

Even though she was the queen of the kingdom, her rights were limited, especially in relation to the kingdom and the king. Esther could not approach the king uninvited. If she did, she could be killed. This singular act of potentially sacrificing herself for the good of her people place her (“If I perish, I perish” - Esther 4:16) in a class of her own in the history of the Hebrew people (cf. Newman 2021:189). However, she is the most celebrated Hebrew lady of all times. She instituted the feast of Purim, the only none religious feast on the calendar of the Hebrew nation. This feast largely celebrated in her honour and courage for saving the nation (Esther 9:18-32). It is also the only feast of the Hebrew nation instituted by human being. The other religious feasts were instituted by the covenant God of the Hebrews (cf. Lev 23:4-44).

4.5.3.12. Conclusion

There are too many similarities between the two passages: The poem of the virtuous woman (Prov. 31:10-31) and the story of Esther who became the Queen of Persia. They were of the aristocratic background; and both were celebrated for their sterling qualities and accomplishments. Both had no author accredited for the literary work, they did not have the name of God mentioned in the whole work; they are both thought of as idealized figures who may not have existed. The women portrayed in these two literary works managed to “controlled the commanding heights”¹²⁰ of their societies without upsetting the established order of male dominance to the benefit of all. This is the new paradigm of womanhood for the Hebrew nation, the Akan of Ghana, and all generations.

¹²⁰ The phrase is believed to have been first used by Vladimir Lenin in 1922 (Kling & Schulz 2011:1)

The search for the historicity of the industrious woman is further boosted with these similarities between Esther, the queen, and the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10-31. This is because in the story of Esther we have another woman of her kind who had the gravitas to shatter the iron dome to receive the praise of all the society. It could be that the two accounts are about the same kind of woman in different spheres of her life's activities.

4.6. Womanist / Feminist re-reading of Proverbs 31:10-31.

4.6.1. Introduction

A womanist perspective (of Prov. 31:10:31) must first examine the general outline of feminist orientation and viewpoint to situate a *modus operandi*. This is because there is a continuation and discontinuation of feminism and womanism. This section will take the path of womanism where it departs from feminism. Bellis (2007:6) defined feminism "as a point of view in which women are understood to be fully human and thus entitled to equal rights and privileges. In no sense can they be considered subordinate or inferior." Feminism is an attempt by women organizations to rid society and biblical interpretation of androcentric and patriarchal influences. This movement argues that the world has been crafted as a man's world making women second class, human beings. Not long after the establishment of this movement, were they faced with the reality of the contribution of the Bible to the relegation of women onto the back seat of society. To correct this anomaly, the role and the place of the Bible and its interpretation should be of major concern to their quest.

There were those who argued that the Bible should be relegated to the dustbin of antiquity and made of no effect to their course. While there were those who insisted that the authority of the Bible and religious institutions should still be maintained, this group is interested in correcting the androcentric and patriarchal interpretation of the Bible. Out of the second group of the feminist, there were five subdivisions or schools of thought pertaining to the role, influence, and interpretation of the Bible. The first is the loyalist group, the second is the universalist and essentialist group, the third is the compensatory group, the fourth is the contrast group and finally the redemptive group (Bellis 2007:5, 21;

cf. Fiorenza 1992:231-234, 145-146, 245). An elaboration on feminism as it pertains to the Old Testament studies and the Ghanaian society have been dealt with in chapter two of this study (chap 2: 64-71).

4.6.2. Loyalist approach

For a rereading of Proverbs 31:10-31, the loyalist approach would be adopted: The loyalist method practices the pyramid of facts technique. This can be seen vividly expressed in how Ephesians 5 is interpreted in the light of Galatians 3:28 as reciprocal respect between the married couple. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Fiorenza 1992:231-234; 145-146; 245; 248; see also Billis 2007:21). The womanist movement was developed as an off-shot of the feminist movement, while the women of colour felt their interest were not well represented in the feminist ideology. Some scholars even argue that the idea of feminism had racist undertones in its origin and as a result could not serve well black women in Africa (cf. Masenya 2004:119). Womanism or a womanist perspective is that aspect of a female negro's way of life that is being subjected to the religious, moral, scriptural, and other sacred education. Alice Walker has ignited this dimension of explanation of the African American female's spiritual encounters and insights. She describes the word 'womanist' in her 1983 gathering of narrative text in an exploration of our mother's farm. In other words, womanist means negro feminist (Sanders 1989:83). It must be said that womanism unlike feminism, does not see men as the problem, but rather, as partners in the struggle for liberation against racism, classism, and poverty.

4.6.3. Textual outline

The following outline is followed in reading the poem by using an Akan womanist outlook. The first passage is read by using a womanist, feminist viewpoint along these outlines: verses 10-12, 13-19, 20-27, 28-31. An attempt is made to explore feminist themes such as power, authority, influence and the public, domestic divide of work station. The next stage is then to read the passage against an Akan Ghanaian context (Obaasima). Here also the same outline is used, however, with the background of an Akan woman and a

Ghanaian socio-economic situation. This background which was established in chapter one is then juxtaposed with the poem. What is more, some Akan proverbs about womanhood, the socio-economic and political situation which come together to influence and affect the well-being of the Akan woman of Ghana will add more colour to the background of the Akan culture and its relationship with her women. Here again, the liberative property of the poem if any, is explored and applied to the Ghanaian Akan woman's context with further suggestions.

4.6.4. Re-reading from womanist / feminist perspective.

4.6.4.1. Stabilizing domestic order (Prov. 31:10-12).

The woman of the poem models a different kind of woman in the history of the Hebrews: Her exceptional homemaking skills, leadership, business acumen, community involvement and covenant relationship are incomparable (cf. Masenya 2016:362). The power of women for good in a society has never been in doubt, but in this poem the Industrious woman made bare what good could become of any community if their women are so minded (cf. Dianzon 2003:55). From the 8th century B.C.E. until Israel and Judah were taken into exile by the Assyrians (732 B.C.E.) and the Babylonians (586 B.C.E.) respectively (Graves 2013:46, 91), the prophets had the task of decrying the moral decay of the women of the twin states among other ills of the society. The women had become extravagant, with excessive desire to embellish themselves and demanding on their husbands for more worth. Their husbands in turn exploited the masses just to satisfy their insatiable women (Am 4:1). The author of the poem might have conceived of a revolutionary idea of womanhood who will not lead the way for national decay, but its reconstruction. He/she as an author might have thought of this woman and started an acrostic poem by asking the rhetorical question "a virtuous woman who can find"?

The poem loses its sapiential edge in the Old Testament if it is limited to the use of advising marriage couples concerning marriage. There are a mirids of possibilities when dealing with the text (Arnold and Beyer 2008:321) and one of them could be the answer to the prophecies of the 8th century prophets especially about the moral and social decay. This section among others explores the possibility of a womanist rereading of the

passage, with the background that marriage and the home are built with structures or hierarchy. When these two are destabilized anarchy is certain and the eventual ruin of that society is inevitable.

The Septuagint (LXX) designated the woman as a manly woman¹²¹ while the Masoretic text also called her a woman of abilities (אִשְׁת־חַיִל). Scholars are as divided as the number of characters in the poem on how to describe the revolutionary female figure (cf. Crook 1954:137-140; Lichtenstein 1982:202-211; Wolters 1988: 446-457; Murphy 1990:27; Crenshaw 1992: 513, 517).¹²² Except in a few instances, the woman was not described in any figures of womanhood but in those of men and divinity.

In Isaiah 3:16-4:1, especially in verses 18-23, the women of Zion were condemned for embellishing themselves with all sorts of precious stones. Some commentators have labelled the degree to which women-folk in Zion could pamper themselves with adornment. Nonetheless, it is important to recall that extreme bondage to style shades the cognitive abilities and captivate people's reasoning power (Kaiser 1983:81). The females of Zion had become captives to fashion and were in competition with one another. The virtuous woman is described as more precious than those precious stones. The new revolutionary woman needed not to measure her worth by the number of precious stones she owns or embellish herself. However, she is more precious than those metals by virtue of her moral worth as a wife and the manager of the household. Perdue (2000:274) opines that "household has a long and storied history as an Israelite and Jewish institution because it is the central social institution among the Hebrews that functioned based on patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal family systems." The household is the centre of the Hebrew social and economic setup and, besides the temple, it could be said to be the next most important arena.

"Her spouse is rest assured by sufficient supply of provisions", in Amos 4:1, shows that, the women of Samaria were described as the cows of Bashan who asked their husbands

¹²¹ γυναίκα ἀνδρείαν (manly woman).

¹²² אִשְׁת־חַיִל "is translated variously as "the Excellent Wife"; the "Valiant Woman"; "the worthy wife" and "a woman of strength"; both "the good wife" and "a virtuous woman"; "The Marriageable Maiden of Prov. 31 housewife (Zucker 2018: 2)".

(men) to bring more for them to satisfy their greed. Bashan is well noted in the Hebrew Bible as a place for the high-quality breed of sheep and cattle because of the quality of their grazing lands, fertile lands with regular precipitation which made this geographical location special (Deut. 32:14; Ps 22:12; Ezek. 39:18). This statement then presupposes that the address was directed to the women in high class of Samaria. This breed of cows was very difficult to keep because they required a lot more attention than regular cattle (Nwaoru 2009:469; also, Irwin 2012:231, 235, 237; cf. Kleven 1996:219). To satisfy their greed, their men had to exploit the vulnerable and the poor in the society. This was one of the reasons why the nation had gone into captivity by the Assyrians (Am 4:2). Some scholars (Crook 1954:138) argue that the “poem (Prov. 31:10-31) antedate Amos 4:1.” However, if we agree that the poem could have been written or edited/redacted during the post-exile Persian period (Yoder 2001:35-37), then, it is not possible to predate it in the 8th century B.C.E. but rather we should consider the possibility that it postdates the prophecies of the prophets Amos and Isaiah. This possibility makes the poem a much later literary creation and a possible influence by the former (cf. Irwin 2012:246).

The industrious woman does not demand more but rather she assures the husband that there is enough supply of provision at home and as a result he should not bother to bring more. There is a judicious use of resources, giving the husband time and resources to attend to equally important activities. This could be the answer to the world’s resources supply deficiency. It is believed that there is enough supply of resource to go round everybody in the world, but for the greed of few who have amassed the lion share of the world resources (Bruce-Lockhart 2015:1).

One wonders what the poet intended to communicate when he/she wrote: She does him good and not evil all the days of her life. Was she submissive, without nagging or not running him down to the neighbours and family? This makes the woman in the poem out of this world. Her nature of piety, ethical values and sagacity contributed to her spouse’s pride and happiness. Within the confines of uprightness and importance, her spouse was not afflicted with mental and emotional disturbances due to excessive complain. Instead, he had the peace of mind domestically since the presence of a virtuous, sagacious, well mannered, talented, altruistic and by extension, a subservient and humble partner, whom

he both admires and treasures. He trusts in her since she is a direct opposite of the quarrelsome, complaining, vulgar and immoral woman (Prov. 19:13; 21:9,19). She does him good and not evil. This kind of virtuous wife's nature does not intend evil to her spouse. Instead, she is a valuable treasure to him, not an obligation. She is of a great assistance and inspiration to her spouse (Buzzell 1985:972).

Today divorce statistics are alarming¹²³ and the chances of a youth to succeed in marriage is not better than the one who takes arms and fight in a war. Marriage union as an institution seems to be an endangered species the world over. The industrious woman according to the poem, will do him no harm all the days of her life. Biwul (2013:282) stressed that "the picture we get of the virtuous wife stands in stark contrast to the quarrelsome, troublesome and unbearable wife (Prov. 19: 13 21:9,19), for she turns the home which is supposed to be a place of love, care and solace into dissention" (see also 15:17; 17:1; cf. Masenya 2016:365).

Some feminist scholars do not see submissive wife as liberatory but rather as an oppressive portrayal of womanhood by a male poet writing for a patriarchal society (cf. Masenya 2001:141). However, Biwul (2013:284; *contra* Masenya 2009:126-150) disagrees with this line of argument by insisting that the book of Proverbs as instructional book, beside its other significance, draws distinction between what is prescriptive and what is contradictory in the scheme of an organized community. The Hebrew nation was perceived to be androcentric however, the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 was set apart with her unique attributes by a male writer (possibly) and by doing this he freed the men from any accusation of misogyny.

It looks lopsided when the contribution of the man to the success of the marriage is not mentioned. This is probably because the poem was not intended to describe the man but the woman. The sage-poet might have envisaged a world with industrious and submissive women at the centre of it. It must be stressed that, here, the woman does not see the man as an opponent or an inconsiderate slave master, but she considers him as a partner

¹²³ "Take any dozen wedded couples, and four will jump overboard; six will stay on deck without joy or love because of children, career, family, and church; and only two will enjoy a happy marriage" (Van Pelt 1992: XI).

in life (cf. womanism), working together for common good (cf. Masenya 2016:364). The woman's power for good is well attested in the poem and credits womanhood in general for the good that could come to society with women of like mind as mothers and wives.

4.6.4.2. Industry the bedrock of society (Prov. 31:13-19)

The inhabitants of Samaria and Jerusalem were notoriously in love with leisure around the time of 8th century B.C.E., prior to the fall of their respective nations (Nwaoru 2009:461-462). In Amos 6:1, 4-6 the prophet rebuked the citizens for their love of pleasure and leisure. "Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in the Mount Samaria..." (6:4): "Who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, Eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall." (4:5) "Who chant to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David" (4:6): "Who drink wine from bowls, and anoint yourselves with the best anointments, but are not grieve for the affliction of Joseph" (6:6; cf. Gen 39-41) Joseph was a slave and a bond's man in Egypt for many years. It is most probable that he was used as representative of the poor and the underprivileged in society. The woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 and her husband are presented in direct opposite of what led the prophets to predict doom and gloom over Jerusalem and Samaria.

Verse 13 reflects that she seeks after wool and flax and love to work with her hand. Leisure and pleasure seeking are not in her vocabulary. She does not spend all her time relaxing and feasting but involved herself in profitable ventures. She does not seem to be satisfied with the condition of the products at the market, she takes the trouble to visit the farm gates or the whole sale shops to buy her products fresh and at a bargain price. It is evident in the passage that she belonged to the higher class of society (Masenya 2004:105)¹²⁴ and yet she does not take her economic advantage for granted. By this she saves a lot of resources for other profitable ventures, like the purchasing of a field to cultivate.

¹²⁴ Cf. Masenya (2004:105) insists that the woman might have come from economically advantaged section of society.

Hawkins (1996:15) takes an exception to the view that she belonged to an economically advantageous class of the society, when he argues that this industrious woman comes across as someone from an affluent background, every character trait displayed by her can be acquired by those who do not enjoy her level of wealth. These are dependability (v. 11) hard work (vv. 11, 13, 15, 17-20, 24, 27) sincerity, prudent in speech (v. 26a), diligence (v. 26b) and finally her reverence of God (v. 30). These are not related to her economic status. It must be said that whether one has wealth or not, does not preclude the one from such character traits.

This woman had servants working under her, either as domestic aide or as part of her cottage industry. Some scholars (Masenya 2004:110) have differentiated between authority and power and defined them as such: Power is the ability to influence certain actions in human society. Authority on the other hand is power conferred on an individual by an establishment, an institution, community, or corporate body to perform a prescribed duty or role (cf. Masenya 2004:110). The woman did not need any authority such as a family head to perform her responsibilities. She is imbued with the power to do good as member of the community.

Furthermore, this woman works late into the night and rises early before day breaks to continue her work (v.18). This is a typical attitude of an entrepreneur or an industrialist managing the resource of the family and her cottage industry wisely not in lavishing herself with ornaments, expensive cloths, anointments, and leisure (cf. Isa 3:14-15; Am 6:1, 4-6), but to work hard.

Some scholars have created a dichotomy between the private space which is the home and the public place which is outside of the home. They have associated working in the private space with inferiority, subordination, and marginalization. Some scholars, in their attempt to explain this, have insisted that the period under study might have been a pre-industrial economy where the family economy was an integral part of the larger economy (see Masenya 2004:104). But it must be noted that even today in a post-modern global economy, has taught us that working from the home is not demeaning or marginalization, but it is a matter of convenience. This convenience has always been available for women who, by the virtue of their gender, have had the role of nurture and training of the next

generation. Working at home or working from home has given the woman of the family the advantage of overseeing the training of her children while supervising her servants in her cottage industry.

The woman was not restricted to the domestic sphere. However, she had the liberty of doing some work in the public space as well. The importance placed on the sphere of one's work seems to be a creation of some modern scholars who have issues with the domestic role of a wife and have associated it with marginalization. It is difficult to understand the rationale behind the assertion that what is done is not as important as to where it is done. So that what is done in the public space is more important than what is done at home. Who made that rule? I am convinced that society did not relegate women to the private space, rather nature if we must stretch the argument (*contra* Camp 1987:55).

Before the industrial age where there was no division of labour, each family had to produce all that it needed. Even then the family unit had some sort of division of labour where the men who by nature were a lot more muscular and stronger went out to hunt and gather, while the females who were either pregnant, nurturing infants or training and overseeing the rest of the family stayed behind. There is nothing more important in any family unit, a society, a town, a city, or a country than the nurture, protection and training of the next generation. There is no place more suited for this activity than the home of the family (*contra* Rosaldo 1974:23).

Setel (1985:37) observes "that the perceived contrast between the public and domestic sphere is the modelling of the feminist ideology where relationship and connection seems to be more esteemed than contrast and separation." This is cause for great concern because ideas like this will end up putting the whole human race on the extinction path. It is like a starter in a car wishing to be the wind screen or the dashboard because it is a lot more prestigious than being hidden somewhere in the heat of the engine. If Ruether's (1993:227) assertion could be tenable then there will be no division of labour even at the family level, where both male and female raised their children together and operated the systems of production together.

Some of the doctrines of feminism have no place in the marriage institution, but they could be experimented in the corporate environment. As an institution it is governed by a set of inalienable rules which stipulate that the man and the woman are equal but different and are meant to complement each other and not to compete with one another (cf. Masenya 2001:137, 141). The male and female genders are the only genders in the humanity (for the purpose of procreation) and there is no human race with only one gender. People are humans because they are male and female. Their difference is their strength (cf. Masenya 2016:364).

4.6.4.3. Womanhood the fulcrum of society (Prov. 31:20-27)

In Isaiah 3:14-15 and Amos 4:1 God's warning was delivered to the twin nations about their transgression against the poor and the needy in society. The Hebrew nation had as one of its tenants the protection and the support of the vulnerable and the weak in society (Isa 58:1-12; Prov. 19:17). However, they had forsaken the path of righteousness and plundered the poor and the needy making the poor, poorer and needy more needy. The gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' grew wider and wider continuously amidst the warning from God of punishment until they were subjugated by the Assyrians and the Babylonians who took them into captivity.

The industrious woman, who I am tempted to call an ideal industrious Hebrew woman, models an answer to this sin, where in verse 20 it reads that "she spreads out her palm to the humble one and puts forth her hands to the needy one". She exhibited disinterested benevolence to the humble and the needy in society, while fulfilling her covenant duty of attending to the needs of those who are disadvantaged in society. Far from oppressing the poor, she shows concern for their welfare. It is most probable that this poem was created as an antithesis for the pre-exilic social and moral decay. This is because far from her being wisdom or wisdom incarnate, she mirrors the ideals of what Hebrew womanhood was supposed to be. It is most probable that someone who had experienced the exilic period and the post exilic situation wanted to simulate what God wanted from the women and by so doing avoid the repetition of God punishing the nation again by exile (cf. Nwaoru 2009:461-462).

Multitasking does not come naturally to most people. There are instances where men and women appointed to public or a demanding position are unable to attend to their family's needs and as a result neglect them making them worse off. The ability to multitask must be recognised as the height of human efficiency. The woman in the poem can multitask and attend to her duties none of them lacking attention. Her family is well catered for, providing their needs and preparing their needs ahead of time.

Besides being efficient, this woman also demonstrated the ability to plan by preparing warm clothes for her family before the onset of the cold weather. Her efficiency affords her husband the peace of mind and time to attend to matters of state. Making him also efficient and respected in the circles of the elders, they are a team and not opponents. They either win together or loose together, and complement one another in their line of duty. From the poem it is not clear how the husband's work enhances her efficiency and respect. However, it could be deduced that if the husband is respected because of her, then, she has earned her respect at the gathering of the elders at the gates.

The divide between the industrialized economy and underdeveloped economy is largely the production and sale of raw materials without processing them. While the developed economies add value to their raw materials, third world economies sell their minerals and agricultural produce to the world market without processing them (cf. Kebschull 1975:373; cf. Abass & Doskaya 2017:152). In verse 13 she seeks for wool and flax, materials for weaving of cloths while in verse 18, she stays all night weaving these into material using the distaff and the spindle (v.19). She does not sell these materials in their raw state even though they are semi processed goods (v. 24). She produces a loin cloth which she sells in the international market using the intermediaries of the Canaanites' middle men.

This woman might have been the bread winner of the family. International trade has always been profitable and this profit might have given the family affluent status. She also produced some tailor-made cloths for both her husband and her children. She knows how to sow thereby producing for her family such outfits. The poem aptly started by stating that such a woman could only be an asset to her husband and children.

Verses 26-27 read thus, "She opens her mouth with wisdom and the law of charity is on her tongue, she watches over the affairs of her house and does not eat the bread of

idleness". These verses summarise her behaviour, her managerial and entrepreneurial acumen. She does not only help the poor in society, she also teaches others to do the same.

4.6.4.4. Division of labour and efficiency (Prov. 31: 28-31)

It is not common to have high achieving people neglecting their families, while they are revered by those outside their families. This is not the story of the woman of the poem. She sees to it that her children grow well, which elicits the husband's approbation and gratitude. In praising her, this behaviour is found in other women just that she raises the bar a notch higher (Fox 2009:891).

The author had no intention of creating one super woman whose kind cannot be found anywhere else, as has been advocated by some scholars (Yoder 2003:432). Verse 29 states that many daughters have done well, "but you excel them all". She is supposed to be the first among equals in the pantheon of women achievers. She is exceptional but not rare, she is outstanding but not alone. Verse 29 removes the tag of uniqueness from the nature of the woman, rather, it is an attempt to school the women of the nation to follow a certain line of behaviour.

I suggest that the author/redactor/editor was a scribe, priest or a prophet who had experienced the exilic, post-exilic or even the pre-exilic situation in Judah, someone who was seized with events prior to the exile. This author wrote or edited a poem extolling the virtues that were expected in the women prior to the exilic situation, especially those extolled by the 8th century prophets (Amos and Isaiah). In other words, this acrostic poem is meant to be a didactic instrument to school women by creating an antithesis of the situation of the women which cumulated into the condemnation by the prophets (cf. Nwaoru 2009:469).

Isaiah 3:16-24 wrote elaborately about how the women were obsessed with outward appearance which led them into excessive ornamentation. Here, the author attempted to de-emphasise the importance women placed on looks and beauty. Verse 30, reads that "Outward appearance maybe deceptive and temporarily but the woman who fears the Lord shall be praised". We will do well to remember that those women who were

renounced by Isaiah were also using cosmetics to alter their looks (Isa 3:16). Some scholars have attributed the presence of the phrase the woman who fears the Lord as an attempt of a redactor who wanted to give the poem cultic flavour (cf. Crook 1954:137). Nevertheless, what the phrase suggest is that the poem may indeed have had foreign origin, possibly as a Babylonian or Persian document. These scholars have reasoned that with the last section of the verse, the woman who fears the Lord, might have had a cultic undertone. The prophets spoke against mere outward piety devoid of substance, while here in this poem, the woman's piety is manifested in her activities toward family life, industry, and disinterested benevolence to the poor and the needy in society. I will not labour the difference between the Septuagint and the Masoretic text since that has been done in the previous chapters. However, I will show how little significance the cult of the Hebrews played in the poem. The poet had no option but to restrict the introduction to the mundane activities of the woman. This is because of the complaints of the prophets to an outward piety devoid of substance. Hebrew women had no cultic role except for showing appearance in the weekly, monthly, and yearly festivals.

This section illustrates the rewards for good behaviour of the woman of the poem. The poet designed the text with the intention of influencing the behaviour of women of the Hebrew nation. He/she cannot achieve the desired goal if there is no reward for good behaviour. Therefore, the poem concluded with the praise of all those whose lives have been touched by this woman. Her recognition at the gates is a public conferment of honour of merit by the leaders of their society.

4.6.4.5. Final remarks

The sheer freedom exhibited by the industrious woman is unprecedented in any patriarchal society, elevating the status of womanhood to new heights in the Hebrew society. This shows a liberated womanhood who was not restricted to any sphere, and had the liberty to go and come as when she pleased (Fox 2009:912; cf. Carmody 1988:913). Some critics (Fontaine 1992:152) have reasoned that she was not independent since her work benefited her husband and her children and not herself. This would have been an issue if she was a mere house help in the household. But this is not the case. She was the wife and mother of the family and as a result, the well-being of her

husband and children, were supposed to be her well-being as well (cf. Fontaine 1992:152; Fox 2009:913).

The husband is seen as not doing anything to advance the course of the family's well-being, leaving the wife to carry all the burdens of caring for the family. There have always been expectations of men and of women in the Hebrew cultural setting. However, whichever roles assigned to the genders, they were supposed to complement each other in the marriage and not to compete for prominence and glory. This makes their glories and failures a shared experience. There is not supposed to be the suggestion that the woman by her acclamation subverted the man's leadership role and authority as the father and the head of the family (Masenya 2016:363-364; Maillot 1989:110; see Fox 2009:913).

4.7. Contextualising the Akan woman.

4.7.1. Akan proverbs on the cultural perception of women.

To understand the place and value of a woman in a typical Akan cultural setting, beside the marginalization and the dehumanizing practices mentioned in chapter one, this section of the study intends to analyse some Akan proverbs about their women with the aim of situating a woman in the Akan culture. "A proverb is a concise and convincing maxim confirmed to be factual by practice" (Arnold & Beyer 2008:314). Further to this, "a proverb is defined as a classical saying frequently used that expresses generally bitter truth, morals, norms, values, and practical issues within society" (Bishwakarma 2020:103). The use of proverbs will assist the study to appreciate how the culture of the Akan has been planned with its view of women.

Gyan et al (2020:2; cf. Abass & Doskaya 2017:149) posit that "maleness and femaleness are strengthened in traditional Ghanaian (Akan) societies by the socialisation procedure and the agents and the agencies involved in the process." Right from birth the male and the female are socialised differently and are expected to maintain the division throughout the rites and processes of life. In Africa, gender differentiation is introduced right from birth. This is because from early childhood children are made to know and observe the limits of their gender. By this process a female child grows and becomes an adult by this

socialisation process. This process of socialisation has its mental and emotive aspects. The female child, who becomes an adult, absorbs these during her socialisation. This process of imitation is comprehensive in that, it takes both the good and the bad opinions and behaviours about women-folk. This process of tutorage takes place through songs, proverbs, wise sayings and folktales. Gradually, the delicate and fledgling minds of the children and young adults imbibe these gender stereotypes accept them as the norms of society and before long they are also passing on the same to the next generation (Gyan 2018:71).

To understand why women are perceived the way they do, it is worthwhile to examine one of the processes of cultural and social engineering: Proverbs. This section will explore some Akan proverbs under the following headings: Dependence and leadership skills; lack of intelligence; stigmatisation of assertive women; women and marriage; positive portrayal of women in Akan proverbs.

Fayemi (2009:1; also, Gyan et al 2020:2) defined proverbs thus: “They are traditional moral and wisdom expressions that are handed over from generation to generation. They are usually passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation” (Gyan et al 2020:2). Gyan (2020:3) argues that “proverbs are very vital in illuminating the condition of women in traditional Ghanaian society. They highlight several ideas and beliefs that always continue to reflect and define women and their roles. These include the definition of women as being reliant on men, portrayal of women as imprudent, kittenish, frail, envious, evil, needy, and immature” (see also Hussein 2005:59-87).

4.7.2. Dependence and leadership skills.

In a typical Akan cultural setting, women are usually portrayed as dependent on men for security and leadership. “*Obaa to tuo a etwere Obarima dan mu*”- which literally means “if a lady buys a gun, it is held in a male’s room for safe keeping” (cf. Gyan et al 2020:4; Krang-Okrah 2011:100). This proverb suggests that females are not supposed to own a gun. Security is the responsibility of men and no matter how a woman’s achievements, she must hide in the shadow of a man. Gyan et al (2020:4) contends that “men have the privilege to own a firearm; therefore, no matter the financial strength or social position of

a woman, she is reliant on a man. Again, the proverb depicts women as unqualified to manage or handle valuable possessions and inform decisions in sensitive situations.”

There is also the suggestion that women are not supposed to engage in some kind of trade or professions (see Gyan et al 2020:4; see also Abass & Doskaya 2017:149) “*Obaa ton nyaadewa na onton atuduro*”- a lady trades garden eggs but not ammunition. This means that the Akan society has been engineered to put women in a subordinate position in work related relationships. They have also been limited as to what they can do. The Akan culture does not socialise her children to see the genders as the same or equal but rather, the female is schooled to accept the superiority of the male (cf. Korang-Okrah 2011:97).

Again, “*Obaa ho ye fe a, na efiri Obarima*”- a lady’s attractiveness ought to be attributed to a gentleman, and “*Obaa da Obarima akyi*”- a female sleeps at the back of a male (Gyan et al 2020:4). The credit for a woman’s excellent performance or well-being should be attributed to a man.

Furthermore, “*Obaa te es ohuriε; Onom mogya na Omma mogya*”- a woman is comparable to a tsetse fly that draws life blood nonetheless does not give blood, women are not given any credit except dependence on men for survival. Then, “*Obaa nyanehoa odane obarima*” - if a woman develops riches, she becomes a male. This means that a woman must be very wealthy to be able to attain the status of a male in society. These and many more Akan proverbs portray the woman as inferior to the man and as a result does not ordinarily have leadership qualities. “*Obaa ne obarima hyia a, obaa ye obaa na obarima nso ye obarima,*” - means when a female and a male encounter each other, the female continues to be a female and a gentleman continues to be a gentleman. This is a gender stereotype in its perfection (cf. Gyan et al 2020:5). The Akan culture can be said to be gender stereotyping and one of the components is the believe and teaching that women lack leadership skills.

4.7.3. Lack of intelligence.

The previous paragraph illustrated that there are proverbs among the Akan which cast their women as dependent of men and unable to muster leadership skills. Here we explore

those proverbs which suggest that women are unintelligent or impulsive. “*Obaa te εs abofra*”- a female act like an infant consequently ought to be supervised and led continually (Appiah et al. 2001:4). It does not matter how old a woman is, she is cast in the light of a child who needs supervision. It is therefore not surprising why in inheritance among the Akan, women are only considered when there is no inheritable males or nephews (cf. Krang-Okrah 2015:14). Women are portrayed as not principled in their thinking and analysis of issues. The proverbs “*Obaa adwene akyikyim εs ne nofo*”- says female’s intelligence is as perverse as a twig. Furthermore, “*Obaa kuta a, Otwa no abenkum mu*”- indicates that a woman cannot be entrusted with anything significant. There is also a proverb “*Obaa ennwene enter a emp a Odaso*”- which directs that a woman’s analytical ability is limited (Gyan et al. 2020:4).

It does not matter the intelligent quiescent of a man and a woman or their cognitive capabilities, a woman is seen as unintelligent and must be guided. This portrayal of women as unintelligent by the Akan proverbs above is not the whole truth. There are other proverbs which cast women, especially old women, as repository of wisdom and guidance. For example, “*yenko besa abrewa*” - says we should consult an old woman for guidance. This is especially among the circles of the royal palaces and among the leadership of villages and communities (Abass & Doskaya 2017:150). When communities are faced with a situation which defies reason or the council of elders are in a dilemma, they usually consult an old woman, who could either be the queen mother or any elderly woman within their circles. The Akan culture holds the view that women in general are unintelligent and as a result must always be guided.

4.7.4. Stigmatization of assertive women.

The Ghanaian society has always stigmatised and labelled females who are confident, fearless, self-motivated and sturdy (cf. Abass & Doskaya 2017:154-155). When a woman is thus labelled, it means she is either confident, self-motivated, robust and she is interested in male dominated activities. Such women in the political area are referred to as men in lady’s body, sorceresses and an unmarriageable woman-“*alomu dzata*”, which means an aggressive women (Gyan et al 2020:6).

The following proverbs suggest the Akan view of an assertive woman: “*Obaa bonoaa na ode kotokuro yi ne twe suo*”: - indicates that an assertive female uses machete to trim her genital hair. “*Besia gor mbanyin gor a, wokyer no mbanyin kyer*”: - says that when a female behaves like a male she is treated as a male. It is obvious from the proverbs so far that the Akan culture is a man’s world with women existing at their pleasure (Gyan et al 2020:5; Abass & Doskaya 2017:155-156). An assertive woman risks being called a witch, which could cause her banishment or lynching. By this societal and cultural engineering women are cowed into timidity.

4.7.5. Women and marriage.

The Akan culture celebrates all the stages of life and has elaborate rites to mark the passage of one stage to another. Arguably marriage is by far the most celebrated among all the rites of passage, especially of the young adults. As a result, the Akan society frowns upon celibacy or upon an unmarried adult without any just cause. There are a lot of proverbs that ridicule unmarried adults, especially women as worthless (cf. Boateng 1996:1-3). This is because the marriage partnership between male and female is recommended as the standard of life for every woman. Women are expected to follow this line of marriage to be seen as an accomplished and honourable in the society. The social engineering has conditioned females to accept this type of marriage life as the normative life choice. Therefore, a life of celibacy no matter the accomplishment of one’s life are not regarded as an acceptable life style. This makes women anxious to become the wife of a man at any cost (Gyan et al 2020:6). The following proverbs from Akan culture makes bare the beliefs highlighted above.

Gyan et al (2020:6) discusses the following: “*Obaa brefoo ko aware a, ode ade paba fie*”- If a meticulous lady becomes a bride, she brings glory to her family. This makes marriage for every young lady or woman the ultimate state of accomplishment among the Akan of Ghana. To be unmarried could be equivalent to a curse in some situations. “*Obaa ansua ade yo, na oko aware a, wodene nkwan gu ahina/ toa mu kyere omaman*”- A lazy woman is an embarrassment to her family and a liability to her husband. Until and unless a woman has succeeded in marriage, she has not accomplished anything. “*Obaa a ope ne kunu, ose: mehwe wo ara*” - a woman who loves her husband also submits to him. “*Obaa pa ne*

dea otie ne kunu asem”:- a good wife is the one who cooperates with the husband. These proverbs are calculated to cower women into submission to their husbands.

4.7.6. Positive portrayal of women in Akan proverbs.

The Akan culture is not altogether negative about the portrayal of women in Akan proverbs. There are some positive views expressed among the social cycles of the Akan folklore and proverbs. Despite the lopsided portrayal of women into subordinate status, there are several proverbs which cast the woman in favourable light (Abass & Doskaya 2017:150). I will start with the proverb about consulting an old woman when a council of elders are unable to come to a proper determination of what should be done (stated earlier). It is not only old women who are able to counsel with the status of an oracle. In fact, it appears that it is a feature of most women and the Akan culture seems to attest to this ability of women. The proverb “*ena ye bosom*” - says that mothers are oracles or a goddess. This is because the Akan discovered that whatever mothers says or warns about, eventually comes true, even if there was no iota of clue or evidence to that effect. The ability of most women to decipher the future is amply attested to by many cultures and societies throughout history¹²⁵(cf. Morelli 1994:61).

There is another proverb that attempts to give a clue of who a virtuous woman (*Obaasima*) among Akan of Ghana. “*Oba mmodemmofo/obaasima na ne ba hye n’akyiri a, osoa nnooma*”:- indicates that a woman who can multitask (carrying her baby at her back while carrying a load on her head) among Akan are singled out as an ideal woman. This will not sit well with the feminists; in fact, this is an example of what feminists cite as an exploitation of women in marriage by patriarchal society. However, Akan culture places a lot of importance on child bearing and nurture of the infants by their mothers. They also respect women who, despite child bearing and nurture, engages in income generating activities. The Ghanaian woman is among the most daring entrepreneurs according to a study (Abass & Doskaya 2017:150; cf. Gyan et al 2020:7;). This does not come as a surprise to most people who are aware of what the women are able to endure to make ends meet. This proverb did not allude to the woman having a husband though she had

¹²⁵ Cf. Matt 27:19 where the wife of Pontius Pilate warned her husband the governor in the trial of Jesus Christ to be careful because the man is not an ordinary man.

a child. In chapter one we stated that among the Akan of Ghana the child belongs to the woman's family. The child belongs to the brothers of the woman more than the biological father (cf. GSS 2003:46; 1.1).

There are also proverbs that underscores the productivity of women as against men. According to the Akan "*Obaa ye kwadu dua ena obarima ye aburo dua*"- a lady is comparable to a banana tree in productivity, whereas a gentleman like to a corn stalk which has a short span of production (Gyan et al 2020:7 see also Abass & Doskaya 2017:150). A banana tree reproduces itself continuously unless uprooted by an external force. That is how the Akan sees a woman in reproduction or child bearing. Since a man's children do not belong to him, it is only the woman who can be said to produce and continue the family line. While the cornstalk produces seed or fruit only once and it is done, having children and many of them is a positive outcome among Akan of Ghana and that is described in this proverb.

Gyan et al (2020:5) explains the following as "a man was born by a woman" ("*obaa na owo obarima*" - it is women who gives birth to men). This fact underscores the fact "that it does not matter how men portray themselves as against women, they were conceived and delivered by women." This makes nonsense of any patriarchal and androcentric tendencies of any community, because, before the boy became a man he had been nurtured and prepared by a woman. The Akan can be said to recognize women for their gender roles especially in matters of child bearing and nurture.

4.8. An ideal Akan woman or "*Obaasima*"

Who is an *Obaasima* or an ideal Akan woman? Before we can reread the poem using the Ghanaian Akan cultural context, we must first define who an ideal Akan woman of worth is? Masenya (2004:119) has argued that "we cannot use feminism's standards because their agenda is different from ours, this is because its focus is more of gender asymmetry than on other forms of oppression such as classicism and racism" What is more, feminism was born with some racial undertones which makes it unfit for black African women to adapt as its concept of liberation (Masenya 2004:119).

We also cannot use womanism to describe the Akan woman's experience because they have a different context from that of the situation of black women in America. In this light, it is worthwhile to heed the call of Hudson-Weems (cf. Masenya 2004:119) for all African men/women to rename and redefine the parameters of their struggle and own what belongs to them. Therefore, I intend to rename what constitute an ideal woman among the Akan of Ghana by redefining what constitutes the situation which needs to be addressed. An Ideal Akan woman among the Akan of Ghana is termed "*Obaasima*." Hereafter the term *Obaasima* would be used to refer to an ideal Akan woman. The definition of an *Obaasima* will be gleaned from Akan proverbs about women and the cultural situation among the Akan, especially those mentioned in chapter one.

What constitutes an *Obaasima* among the Akan of Ghana? Unlike Bosadi which identifies classicism, racism, sexism etc as elements of contention in South Africa, *Obaasima* has as its focus outmoded cultural practices, poverty and maybe to some extent sexism. An *Obaasima* does not see their male counterparts as the problem, but they see them as partners, allies and not opponents. An *Obaasima* among the Akan must marry, however, if she is single due to bereavement, divorce, or lack of suitable suitor, it does not diminish her worth. She is a mother, whether with a husband or not, and as a result a nurturer and a teacher of the next generation. She can raise her children all by herself. If she must do that by circumstance, she is hard working whether married or single. She is an entrepreneur and she creates business out of any venture for livelihood. She is a fighter for her liberty and for her share of the family's resources. An *Obaasima* is a mother whether married or not, she is a nurture of the next generation, she is an entrepreneur and she is a wife if she finds a suitable partner.

4.9. Different contexts between Akan and African American women.

The womanist brand of feminism is a point of departure for Akan woman of worth and as a result it is worthwhile to do a comparison between the two to situate the continuation and the discontinuation of the two.

- Akan woman is not exposed to the dehumanizing environment of racism and slavery as their American compatriots across the Atlantic Ocean. However, she

loves her male counterpart who still suffers from the debilitating influence of the erstwhile colonialism and neo colonialism.

- Akan woman is at the receiving end of primal cultural heritage which has been in practice for many centuries in Ghana, making it accepted by all and sundry, even when it is obviously dehumanizing and oppressive. The African American women have been disconnected from their cultural roots and at the same time they are alien in the western culture.
- Akan people and their culture are the largest in Ghana. As a result, they have enjoyed the benefit of being the dominant culture in the country. While the African American women are in the minority in United states of America.

4.10. Akan culture dehumanizing and marginalising women

Outmoded culture is the main concern when it comes to dealing with issues of marginalisation and dehumanisation of women among the Akan society. Unlike women in the western hemisphere where racism, classicism and sexism are among their concerns, the Akan woman has an outmoded cultural practice as the main debilitating factor to her well-being, except for poverty which is not akin to the Akan culture, but universal to all women except for a few. The Akan culture has successfully engineered their community to gender divide which has culminated into stereotyping everyday activity into gender spheres. Outmoded practices such as widowhood rites, female circumcision, sex slavery (trokosi), universal male hegemony needs attention (cf. Kanyoro 1996:9).

4.11. An Akan womanist (*Obaasima*) approach.

4.11.1. Obaasima as a home maker.

One of the portraits of the industrious woman painted by the poem is a home maker who is in-charge of her household. The home is considered as an important sphere of the Hebrew and Akan societies, a micro unit for economic activities, and cradle for the nurture of the next generation (cf. Abass & Doskaya 2017:150). Even in the absence of her husband, she takes charge of her household and manage it to the admiration of all including the husband, while she properly disciplined her children. The ability of an Akan

woman to manage her home in the absence of a husband is admirable. They do not wait for a man to lead if they must take initiative. They do to sustain and protect their households. With the rising statistics of female headed household among the general population of Ghana, the migratory nature of men for greener pastures in the western hemisphere is evident and the general early mortality of men requires that most women are daily taking up the challenge of managers of the households and their families (cf. Boateng 1996:2-3; Brown 1996:22). An Akan woman's role in the society is therefore one of significance and not of subordination and dependence.

4.11.2. *Obaasima* as a hardworking woman

The poem of the industrious woman brings to bear her ability to work to generate resources for the betterment of her family. To supply food and warm clothing for her household and, to oversee to her many servants are some of her activities, beside her entrepreneurial ability that makes her to invest in profitable ventures. She is not eating the bread of idleness and working all night because she envisages a profitable outcome (vv. 27). This quality can be seen in the Akan woman in her daily run of activities. Akan women, like her African counterparts, are usually involved in diverse commercial events on daily, even more than women in other parts of the world (Ntiri 1982:14; see Masenya 2004:147). An Akan married woman is expected to cook, clean, do the laundry, attend to the children and her husband. What is more, if she has an employment outside the home she will have to attend to her official duties as well. She is simply expected to be the manager of the home and most of the time she is a bread winner as well (Korang-Okrah 2011:98).

Akan proverb that says "*Oba mmodemmofo/obaasima na ne ba hye n'akyiri a, osoa nnooma*"- a virtuous woman is the one who can multitask. This is a routine for most Ghanaian women not the least Akan women. They are like a goods train, laden with load while nurturing their infants. The feminists may not accept this as a virtue but servitude, however, without which the Akan society will not revolve and evolve. Beside the three duties of procreation, domestic work and taking part in societal activities, the Ghanaian females involves themselves in trade and commerce to raise funds for domestic sustenance: The domestic demands of food, clothing, and educational payments, these

take the chunk of their income, beside the daily needs of running a household (Krang-Okrah 2011:98).

4.11.3. *Obaasima* as a supportive wife

The disruptive nature of an ill-mannered lady as a wife is not lost on the Hebrew society (cf. Proverbs 21:9; 19; 25:24; *contra* 12:4; 18:22). By this they admit that the well-being of the family and the society, at large is based on a good and supportive wife. The poem in Proverbs 31:10-31 especially verse 12, states categorically that “she does him good and not evil all the days of her life”. This is the wife every man wishes to have and this is the woman who nurtures great societies and countries. “A good wife is the crown of the husband.” There are Akan proverbs that depict their women as supportive or encourages them to support their husbands. “*Obaa pa ne dea otie ne kunu asem*” tells that a virtuous lady is the one who cooperates with the spouse and “*Obaa a ope ne kunu, ose: mehwe wo ara* - which means a supportive and a loving wife accepts the leadership of the husband. These two proverbs signify among the Akan community that submission of a wife to her husband is a virtue and the women who willingly submit to their husbands are considered virtuous or *Obaasima* (Gyan et al 2020: 2-7; cf. Bishwakarma 2020: 104).

4.11.4. Mothers of the next generation

The Hebrew society holds in high esteem the reproductive value of womanhood besides being married as a woman. A woman’s self-worth is in her ability to have children of her own. Infertility could be considered as a disfavour from God or a curse to a woman. Sometimes women are divorced for their inability to have children (cf. Stol 2016:163-164). There are Akan proverbs that underscore the reproductive quality of women as the cradle of every society and the hope of its continuity. The proverb “*Obaa ye kwadu dua ena obarima ye aburo dua*” (a woman is a banana and a man is a corn stalk in their reproductive capacity) underscores that the female is a banana tree while the man is a corn tree. Here it is stated that it is the woman who grows nations or society and not men. They bear and nurture the next generation. While this accolade is laudable, it comes as

a great cost to the woman's health and emotional well-being¹²⁶(cf. Dery & Aikins 2022:36-46; Senah 2003:47).

4.11.5. Benefactor of the less privileged

The poem of the virtuous woman is depicted as being kind to the needy and the poor. "She spreads out her palm to the humble one and puts forth her hands to the needy one." She does not do all the good works only to the benefit of her family but the larger society as well. She was simply the mother for the motherless and the supporter of those disconsolate, she lives for everyone else to live. Besides being a religious virtue, it is also a sign of good nature of anybody to be kind to the needy (cf. Prov. 21:13;19:17). One does not need to be rich or belong to an affluent society to exhibit kindness to the less privileged in the society. Everyone can be kind to one another. The South African maxim Ubuntu - "I am because you are," or "we are our brother's keepers" shows that everyone can be a benefactor of another person (cf. Masenya 2004:156). The social support system of the Akan society is well attested in that one does not have to have children before one can receive the respect and support of children of other women, where one calls his aunts and every woman of her mother's age as mother. The youth are taught to accord all the respect due to their father to any man that is a contemporary of their father (cf. Masenya 2004:156).

The Akan woman as a wife has the duty of supporting extended relations of her own family and that of her husband's family. This usually includes, but not limited to nephews, nieces, parents and grandparents, uncles, aunts and most of the time stepchildren of the husband's previous marriage, and also of children born out of this wedlock (Krang-Okrah 2011:99). The picture of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 shines liberative light on the Akan women and their society. She can give a sigh of relief that her suffering is not dehumanizing, but plays a significant role in the building of a family, society and a nation. This is in no way absorbing any lazy and irresponsible man from his responsibilities as husband and father of the family.

¹²⁶ It is estimated that about 585,000 women lose their lives every year due to pregnancy related complications in less developed countries including Ghana. What is more, in Ghana, it is about 200 to 740 deaths per 100,000 live births (Senah 2013: 47).

However, due to unfavourable socio-economic conditions, this basic trait of humanity to fellow humans is losing its hold on the people in general and not forgetting the Akan woman. Most Ghanaians are now resorting to individualism and to a nuclei family instead of looking out for the extended family who let alone their fellow humans. That notwithstanding, the Akan woman with the knowledge of the industry of the industrious woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 stand a better chance of saving the time-tested cultural practice of looking out for one another (Jansen 2018:136; see also Oduyoye 2001:22).

4.11.6. Synthesis

The Hebrew Bible does not associate any historic figure with the industrious woman in Proverbs 31:10-31, which makes it difficult to conclude that she was a real flesh and blood person who ever lived. However, the activities described in the poem could be performed by any diligent woman over a life time of activities. Poetic language has a way of compressing several years into few lines and here just twenty-two verses. It is therefore logical to conclude that the poem was written as a literary piece of art an antithesis for the historic failings of the Hebrew nation, especially her women.

The possibility that King Agur could be the same as Nabonidus the last King of Babylon is very interesting and deserves more research attention. If this is true, then, Belshazzar could be the same as Lemuel and his supposed mother could be the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. This suggestion is emanating from the exploration of the last redactor or editor's reason for bringing Proverbs 30 and 31 together.

The story of Esther, a Hebrew hero who saved her people from genocide coincidentally has the same background as the woman in the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31. Both are set in post-exilic Persian period; both are of aristocratic settings; both had an altruistic attitude towards their people and those who needed salvation. In both instances the women were the centre of attention in the story.

Women have always been strong in their roles as mothers and wives of the people. It does not matter where they operate from, domestic or public, however, they are stronger when they serve as the nurture and trainers of the next generation.

The poem is an example for the Akan community and her women that women and men are complements to each other and they win or lose together. The Akan woman is not marginalized when she contributes to the well-fare of the family and the society. The poem has illuminated the darkness of hitherto, the erroneous believes that, the Akan woman, by supporting her family and raising her children consigned her to the background of life and as a result she is marginalized and dehumanized as a female.

CHAPTER FIVE

Synthesis

5.1. Introduction

This study set out to explore the possibility of reading the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31 using the context of an Akan woman of Ghana. With the intention of liberating the Akan woman from the dehumanizing and oppressive cultural practices, which makes her second class to her male counterpart or an inferior version. This enterprise required that both the text of Proverbs 31:10-31 and the context of the Akan woman should be investigated to indicate how both cultures evaluates their women-folk, and whether the poem itself has legitimacy to be used as a text for comparison.

The context of an Akan woman of Ghana, which is matrilineal in its inheritance system, require that children inherited their maternal uncle. This system makes children therefore belong to their mother's family. This arrangement sometimes makes the woman and her brothers solely responsible for the upkeep of the child or children in a marriage. Women are expected to play the roles of a wife, a mother and in most cases, a bread winner of the family. However, in the matrilineal inheritance system, males are first in the line of inheritance. Even nephews are opted for before a woman could be considered for inheritance. The Akan woman is expected to be seen, but seldomly heard in the family, community, and the society at large. This arrangement makes her appear to be marginalized and oppressed, maybe inferior to her male counterpart in the societal arrangement (1.1).

Unlike Masenya (1993; see 2004; 2001; 1997; 1995) who had to create a pathway in the tropical African rain forest with her bare hands by her seminal work on the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31 and her subsequent publications on the subject matter, this study had the benefit of her pioneering work of rereading the text from the black African perspective. This study also benefited from Jansen's PhD thesis (2018:1-248; see 2020:1-9) on the text and several scholars who have done detailed work on different aspects of the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31. Some of these scholarly works includes: Biwul's (2013) reflection of the poem from the Nigerian perspective, Ndogo (2014) who analysed the whole

chapter 31 as a final parental advice to her children, Szlos's (2000), a literary critical study of the depiction of the woman in the text, Wolters (cf.1984; 1985; 1988) whose works sharpened the focus of the vex issues in the text and finally Yoder's (2001; 2003) socioeconomic reading of the poem and the suggestion of the post-exilic Persian period date of the text, among many others, are invaluable in the course of the study (3.5).

Wisdom literature as a *genre* in Old Testament studies had a checked history and had moved from being borrowed from the neighbouring nations to its acceptance as having its own claim as indigenous to the Hebrew tradition. As much as wisdom tradition is common to the Ancient Near Eastern neighbourhood, the Hebrew wisdom tradition is indigenous to the Hebrew culture. Their sages thought of their society, especially in the book of Proverbs with the imagery of womanhood, whether good or bad. The book of Proverbs concludes that a woman of industry and strong character is more valuable than the most precious stone. So far, no woman in the history of the Hebrew nation has been identified as the replica of the Industrious woman of the poem. However, some women like Esther models a resemblance of the woman in the poem with similar backgrounds and tenacity of purpose (2.1; 4.3.3.12).

It is possible that the woman in the poem was a literary creation by a post-exilic poet who reflected on the condition of the Hebrew nation before the Babylonian exile. This resembles a didactic tool to school women especially about what is expected of them and how they can contribute to the task of a nation building. Therefore, this poem serves as an antithesis of the historic failures of the Hebrew nation, especially the women (8th century B.C.E.; cf. 3.5.3; 3.5.4).

The book of Proverbs was not written as a unit, but as an anthology, a collection of several works from different authors over a period. In view of this, the date of its authorship is difficult to determine except those scholars who speculate that the final editorial work for the MT could be around the post-exilic Persian period. A close look at both the LXX and MT shows that the two manuscripts of Proverbs have different arrangements, especially from chapter 24 onwards. This could suggest that the final editor of the MT knew something about those chapters which he/she brought together to form a *paratext* (4.2.1.2.3.3).

Textual study suggested that the text of Proverbs 31 could be of a late post-exilic Persian era with the frequent occurrence of late biblical Hebrew vocabulary and Aramaisms. The presence of masculine variants for a feminine text and the presence of terms which were hitherto this time reserved for males and for God, suggest that the text could be an adaptation from a male poem into a feminine text (cf. 3. 3. 4; 3. 3. 5; 2. 4).

Feminism as a female advocacy group has had the course to protest the dominance of males in the societal structure. Nonetheless, they have championed the equality of both males and females in all facet of life. Terms like patriarchy, androcentrism and patrilocal are some of the descriptions used for male dominated society and family structure (2.11; 2.12).

5.2. Problem statement

The Akan society of Ghana does not evaluate their women the same way as they evaluate their men. Women are at the lowest level of the perking order of society. Women are expected to work hard all their lives and when they grow old, they are suspected of witchcraft and when they are widowed, they are suspected of killing their husbands. The study sought to investigate why Akan discriminates against its women and with the help of inculturation and liberation hermeneutics challenge the Akan culture with the Hebrew culture, especially as they pertain to the poem of the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31.

Akan culture is patriarchal and to some extent androcentric in its orientation and organization. However, the role and the status of women in Akan culture is indispensable to the well-being of and the continuity of the Akan community. Gender roles among Akan culture should not be misconstrued as marginalization and dehumanization, but rather, such roles should be considered as complementing the roles of men for the well-being of their society. This illumination is derived from the comparison with the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31, whose existence is defined by her contribution to the well-being of her immediate family: Husband and children. What is more, those who need support and the society. She lived for others to live, and this is the new paradigm of womanhood which Akan women are already exhibiting.

The roles as a mother and a wife are in no way demeaning and subjugation of women; rather they are honourable and empowering. In fact, it embodies the height of their self-actualization and as a result should not be classified as burden or slavery. Both the Hebrew and the Akan cultures have in common the pivotal role of women in the survival and the well-being of their existence.

What is more, the insight from the Industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 shows that men and women can only succeed as partners and not as opponents, vying for pre-eminence both at home and in the society at large.

The sages of the Hebrew nation and the editors of the book of Proverbs might have brought this poem (Prov. 31:10-31) of the industrious woman at the end of the collection to sum up the imagery of womanhood in the book. Not only this but also, to debunk the erroneous notion that might have been suggested by the negative roles played by some women both in the past and in the present. Proverbs 31:10-31 has liberative qualities for the Akan woman of Ghana in her roles as the manager of the household, mother, the trainer of the next generation and a wife of her husband if she chooses to be married (1.2).

5.3. Aim and objectives

The aim of this research was to interrogate Proverbs 31:10-31 with inculturation and liberation hermeneutics using the context of the everyday Akan woman of Ghana for the following objectives:

To examine the socio-cultural background of discrimination against Akan women of Ghana. These included the general overview of the Akan people of Ghana, their cultural uniqueness, the constituents of the matrilineal system of inheritance and how the family economic structure is organized. Some cultural practices which are inimical to Akan women of Ghana, like widowhood rites and male preference over females for inheritance. Governmental policies geared towards addressing these gender inequalities also inclusive (chapter one).

To inquire into related literature in Proverbs and the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31 and the related cultures of the Hebrew nation and the Ancient Near East, as they pertain to their

women. Gender and feminism in relations to the Ghanaian and Ancient Near Eastern cultures were also dealt with (chapter two).

To examine the significance of inter-textual and intra-textual study of the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31 and ascertain the importance of literary and grammatical features. These included genre and style of the poem, translation, textual criticism, verse by verse analysis of the poem and the placement of the poem in the book of Proverbs and between Proverbs 31:1-9; 31:10-31 (chapter three).

To do an appropriation of the findings so far using inculturation and liberation hermeneutics, with the hope of ascertaining the identity of the industrious woman of the poem (Prov. 31:10-31). The woman in the poem was compared with Queen Esther of the Persian empire with fruitful results of similarities. Why the final editor rearranged the chapters of the book of Proverbs from chapter 24:23-31:31 was conducted. Womanist/feminist rereading of the poem and comparison with an Akan woman of worth. Lastly, an Akan woman of worth was proposed as an Obaasima and was compared with womanism and liberation hermeneutics (chapter four).

Finally, to sum up the study so far coupled with the synthesis of all the findings of the study from chapter one to the fourth chapter and make conclusion and recommendation for further study. This included the review of the problem statement, objectives of the study, methodology, the chapter division and the hypothesis (chapter five).

5.4. Research methodology

The place of methodology in the study of the Old Testament cannot be overemphasised. This is because the process of compiling the Old Testament requires that to unpack it properly. Therefore, one must adopt the right tools of exegesis (cf. Groenewald 2007:1-12; see also Le Roux 2019:3-5; 2017:1-15). These tools in the context of current study comprised the contextual reading of the text (Inculturation and liberation hermeneutics). This methodologically innovation, which originated from Africa south of the Saharah since the turn of the twentieth century, has been the main exegetical tool for the contextual study of the biblical text. This methodology makes the context of the receptor community and biblical text equal partners in the interpretation process. This is because, both are

placed side by side as the text and context of the receptor community and are juxtaposed to create meaning (Holter 1995: 33-46; Meyer 2015:3 see Ukpong 2002:12).

In this regard, the context of the Akan woman of Ghana was highlighted in the introduction of the study. This was done to sketch the background from which the Industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 was read. The cultural inhibitions and bottlenecks which militate against them were enumerated.

In modern scientific research, it has become customary to survey what has been said or done in the intended inquiry before one embarks on his or her study (Hahn 1956:3). Scholarly journals and commentaries were reviewed to set the tone for this research. Among the broad spectrum of literature, were the literature about wisdom thought among the Hebrews and their Ancient Near Eastern neighbours. Materials on Proverbs and the poem (Prov. 31:10-31) were reviewed, while current trends in feminism in both the Old Testament scholarship and Ghanaian context were studied. The contending concepts of who the industrious woman was, also received attention besides the authorship and the possible date of final editorial works.

Synchronic and diachronic analyses of the text were done to examine both how the text has changed over the years (diachronic) and the text as it is today (synchronic). Under diachronic analysis was the background, context, the date, the authorship, the *Sitz im Leben* (the historical setting of the text) and the paratext. The synchronic study comprised the study of the placement of the text in its current position in the book of Proverbs (*Sitz in der Literatur*).

The traditional Hebrew perception of the industrious woman was surveyed to situate the woman both as a historical figure or as a literary creation. This woman was compared with Esther, a Hebrew queen in the Persian kingdom to further ascertain her historicity or not. Proverbs 31:10-31 was subjected to womanist analysis and finally to liberation hermeneutics to explore whether the Akan woman's situation could be described as subjugation or liberatory.

5.5. Chapter division

The study was organized as follows:

Chapter one introduced the context of the Akan cultural settings, especially as it pertains to their women folks. The research problem, aim and objectives, the research question, methodology, hypothesis, chapter outline and terminologies were addressed.

Chapter two examined scholarly literature on the wisdom cultures both among the Hebrews and the neighbouring Ancient Near Eastern countries. This included review of literature on Proverbs and the poem (Prov. 31:10-31). Here, the date, authorship and composition were reviewed. Different concepts of the identity of the woman of the poem were discussed. Current trends in gender studies as they pertain to both the Old Testament and Akan culture were also surveyed. Finally, the chapter offers comparison between the Hebrew and the Akan cultures as they pertain to women.

Chapter three focused on the synchronic and diachronic aspects of the text. This included the *genre* and style of the text, translation, textual criticism, structure and outline, detailed analysis of the text, *Sitz in der literatur* (literary settings) and *Sitz im Leben* (historical settings).

Chapter four dealt with the concept of the industrious woman among the Hebrew tradition, *paratext* speculated on what could have accounted for the rearrangement of the chapters in Proverbs by the final editor of the MT. Esther, a Hebrew queen in Persia was exposed and compared with the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31. A womanist rereading of the text and *Obaasima* analysis of the poem (liberative hermeneutics) were also dealt with in this chapter. Finally, the chapter explored whether the poem of the industrious woman has a liberative effect on the Akan woman of Ghana.

Chapter five is an overview of the study. It included the response to the research problem, aim and objectives, the research question, methodology, chapter division, hypothesis, limitation of the study, the outcome of the study and recommendation for further research.

5.6. Outcomes of the study

The following outcomes have been gleaned from the study of Proverbs 31:10-31 and the context of the Akan woman of Ghana. They have been grouped according to the chapters of studies.

5.6.1. Literature review

The study suggested that it is most probable that king Agur (Prov. 30) and Lemuel (Prov. 31) of *hamassa* were historical figures (2.4.1).

The poem of the industrious woman could be dated around 5th-4th B.C.E. (2.4.2). The life style of the industrious woman is akin to that of the imperial woman during the Persian period (Lang 2004:189). Queens had a lot of influence almost as their kings. They run a large household with a lot of servants producing a lot of marketable goods for the market. It is most probable the industrious woman was an imperial woman, perhaps a queen (2.10.1.4.).

5.6.2. Synchronic and diachronic analyses

5.6.2.1. Verbal anachronism

There are some verbal anachronisms with the poem especially with the textual study. Words which were hitherto this time were reserved for God, divinity or men of valour were used in praise of the woman of the poem which makes the poem out of place in a cultic culture of the Hebrews. Words like (עָזָה; וַיְהִי־לָזוֹתָ תְּתַלְּלֵנִי וַיְהִי־לִּי) *halelu-yah*; 'might', 'strength' or 'power' (cf. 3.5.2; 3.5.16; 3.5.22; Schultz 1980:659; Ps 10:21; 22:3; 22:22; 34:2; 35:18; 63:5; 69:30; 92:14-17; 106:1; 106:2; 109:1; 115:17; 119:175; 137:2; 145:1; 9:14; 145:2; 147:1; 147:7; 147:12; 148:1,2; 150:6; see also Coppes 1980:217-218).

There are some masculine variants and sometimes infinitive variants of a poem purely reserved for a female. Sometimes masculine words are used instead of feminine, giving the impression that the poem might have been adapted from a masculine poem into a feminine (טָרַח טָרַח; בְּלִילָה בְּלִילָה cf.3.3.4.). There are also masculine and infinitive variants of a feminine word giving the impression that the poem might have been a formulaic piece

which could be used for any of the genders (נְטָעָה Qal perfect 3rd person singular feminine, has masculine variant, נְטָע noun masculine singular construct and infinitive נְטָע infinitive, cf. 3.3.4.) of the same word.

5.6.2.2. Presence of Aramaic and late Biblical Hebrew

There are frequent occurrence of Aramaic and the Late Biblical Hebrew words in the poem and sometimes some of these words were confused with Hebrew words. The corruption of שניא of an Aramaic origin, שָׁנָא which means to change, pe. pf 3 mpl שְׁנוּ Dan 3:27; Pt. Act Fs שְׁנִיא Dan 7:19; masculine plural שְׁנִין Dan 5:9; fpl שְׁנִין Dan 7:3 - intransitive verb, be changed: of garment, by fire Dan 3:27 (Austel 1980:942). It is most probable that the scribe wanted to say double or changes of cloths using an Aramaic word (שָׁנָא from שניא) which was confused with Hebrew words (שָׁנִי שְׁנִי שְׁנִים; 3.3.4; 3.15.14) which was confused with scarlet which does not make sense in the context.

There is also another confusion of Hebrew and Aramaic words קָדְמוּ קָמוּ these words cannot be found in the Hebrew vocabulary; however, it is being translated as if it is קום a Hebrew word for rise up or stand up. In verse 28 instead of her sons rise up and call her blessed or happy, it is proposed that it should rather be her sons are brought up well and her husband praise her. This is because the word which was translated as blessed (וַיֵּאֱשְׁרוּהָ) in the qal (אָשַׁר) can be translated as “go straight” or “advance” and in a figurative sense means children are brought up well (3.5.20).

It appears the poem was originally written in Aramaic and the Aramaic found in the poem was that which was used in official documents or in official circles. During the exilic and post-exilic periods, Aramaic was the official language of both Babylon and Persia (Yoder 2001:24; cf. 3.3.4.).

The poem was not meant to be complete description or account of the life of the industrious woman in the poem. As a result, it could not be used to reconstruct the life of

whoever the poem sought to portray. Any attempt to make a categorical statement about the woman in the poem would be fraught with difficulty.

It is most probable that the poem was written as an antithesis of the historic failures of the Hebrew nation, especially the moral decay that characterised the twin nations during the 8th century B.C.E. It might be a literary creation which was influenced by their history and the heroic life of Esther the Hebrew queen of the Persian empire (3.5.3; 3.5.5; cf. 4.2.5).

5.6.2.3. Possible date and authorship

It is probable that the poem could have been written, edited/redacted circa 5th century B.C.E. by Ezra (*contra* Biddle 2021:152) due to the following internal and external reasons: The presence of official Aramaic and late Aramaic dialects vocabulary which could mean that the writer was an educated scribe living and working around the exilic and the post-exilic Persian period (cf. Yoder 2001:24,31). The similarity of words between or among the poem, the book of Ezra and Daniel could suggest common background, however, the weight is more on Ezra than Daniel due to some external evidence in the book of Ezra. Ezra was a priest and a scribe which gave him the advantage of both two key professions which were needed to work as an editor, redactor or author of the poem (Ezra 7:1-5,12). Internal evidence from the book of Ezra concerning his role as the editor and preserver of the written documents (Ezra 7:6,11). His role as the leader of the second post-exilic exodus (457 B.C.E) from Babylon to Jerusalem. He was thus responsible for the maintenance of the sacred records/documents (Ezra 7:13-26). His role as the “second Moses” who was tasked to reconstitute and supervise the services of the second Temple by the Persian king Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:21,24). The late post-exilic date advocated by most scholars (Yoder 2001:35-37). It is most likely that Ezra had some role to play in either editing of the poem or as a redactor and possibly the author due to the above-mentioned reasons (3.7.1).

5.6.3. Appropriation of Proverbs 31:10-31 and Akan women.

5.6.3.1. The historicity of the industrious woman.

The historicity of the industrious woman has been subjected to critical examination and doubts due to the sheer volume of her activities. However, if these activities are spread over fifty years of an active adult life, it does not look superlative anymore, as has been made to look in 22 verses of the poem. Therefore, it is possible that she was an authentic literary figure (4.1.4).

5.6.3.2. *Paratext*

It is possible that the final redactor/editor rearranged the chapters from chapter 24:23-31:31 to emphasize the female imagery of the book of Proverbs (4.2.2), to suggest a consanguineous relationship between Agur and Lemuel, like father and son (cf. Nabonidus and Belshazzar). It is possible that the *Hamassa* of Northern Arabia in both chapter 30 and 31 is the same as the *Hammath* in Northern Arabia (damaged manuscript notwithstanding) one of the places of Nabonidus self-imposed exile (4.2.3).

It is possible that the poem of the industrious woman was inspired by the life of Esther the Hebrew queen of Persia. The story of Esther and the industrious woman demonstrated that women can “control the commanding heights” (cf. Kling & Schulz 2011:1) of their societies for the benefit of all without overthrowing the established order of male dominance (4:16).

5.6.3.3. Similarities between Esther and the industrious woman

There are some similarities in the story of Esther and the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 which cannot be overlooked in the scheme of the historicity of the woman in the poem.

Both the story of Esther and the woman in the poem had an aristocratic background and are set in the post-exilic period (cf. Masenya 1997:61; Dillard and Longman III 1994:191). The industrious woman called her husband master while Esther called her husband king. Both have their historicity in doubt, both of them are found in the writings of the Hebrew

scripture and in the Old Testament, the book of Esther comes after Ezra-Nehemiah, both of which are post-exilic literature. Both literatures do not have the name of God mentioned in them, and they are anonymous (4:14).

5.7. Hypothesis

Can a literary figure have its bases in historical events and can the same figure be used as a role model for any contemporary society?

The industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is thus a literary creation as an antithesis of the moral and social decay of the Hebrew women in their past history for didactic purpose aimed at moral and social reengineering of the Hebrew society. The Akan woman would be empowered for the good of the Akan society if the virtues of the industrious woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 are emulated.

5.8. Conclusion

The poem presented the centrality of the household as the basic unit of every society and the significance of the influence of womanhood as managers of this unit of society. It takes a male and a female to make a family and they are supposed to complement each other as a team and not functioning as opponents. The roles played by an Akan woman of Ghana makes the woman a focal point of the family system. Her contribution to the family and the society cannot be overemphasised. As a result, she cannot be deemed oppressed by her roles as a mother, a wife and in most cases as a bread winner, but as a champion of the continuity of the Akan society and its culture. Therefore, the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31 serves as wisdom and a moral constitution to maintain such roles in the Akan community. There were five research questions and the following are the summaries of the outcome:

The study of the poem of the industrious woman, the context of Akan culture and the situation of its women suggested that Akan culture, like all primal cultures, have gender roles. These gender roles are not to be considered marginalization, dehumanizing or oppressive, but they are to be seen as a division of labour which (when performed well) complement each other and makes the family and the society well cared for. Some cultural practices among Akan, such as the inheritance system that prefers males over

females even nephews, widowhood rites could be considered outmoded and should be discarded (cf. Abass & Doskaya 2017:156).

The book of Proverbs was not written as a unit, but as a collection of different materials from different eras and compiled to form a library of wise sayings. Depending on how one approached the book, several layers can be identified as constituents of the anthology of Hebrew wisdom. Solomon's association with the book must not be considered that he is the author of the whole collection. It is possible that he might have made some contribution to the book at some point in time, however, internal evidence suggests that it has been the work of several authors, redactors, and editors over a long period of time. However, Proverbs 31:1-9 and 10-31 are considered as having the same author as indicated by the absence of authorship associated with the latter. The date of the book's authorship is still in contention among scholars of Old Testament Studies. However, the pendulum of consensus seems to swing to a post-exilic Persian period.

Synchronic and diachronic analyses of the poem suggested that the poem is well preserved with few variants, however, the preponderance of late Biblical Hebrew vocabulary and Aramaisms in the poem suggested a Persian period influence on the poem and perhaps its origin. The poem is well situated at the end of the book of Proverbs as a logical conclusion of the female imagery that has characterised the book.

The Hebrew tradition does not conclusively associate one historic figure with the industrious woman of the poem. It is most probable that the poem was written as a literary piece to counteract the historic failure of the women of the Hebrew nation, especially during the 8th century B.C.E. The story of Esther, the Hebrew hero who became queen of Persia, when compared with the poem, exhibited some degree of similarities between them. It is curious why the final editor or redactor of MT decided to rearrange the chapters and the verses of the second half of the book of Proverb. It is most probable that the last two chapters of the book have a lot in common especially the possible familiar connection between Agur and Lemuel of *hamassa/hammath* and whether they are the same as (Nabonidus and) Belshazzar of Daniel chapter five. The last two chapters of the book of Proverbs could be exilic and or post-exilic literature.

The *Obasima* (an Akan woman of worth) when compared with the poem throws

liberative light on the life of the former for her roles as mother and a wife of the family unit, patriarchal and androcentric cultural practices notwithstanding. She is a silent champion of the Akan community, the fulcrum of the society.

5.9. Recommendation for further study

The following areas of research could yield fruitful results in the future:

- Further study should be conducted on why the final redactor or editor of MT brought chapters 30 and 31 together.
- Further studies should be conducted into the contribution of some Akan women who managed to shatter the glass ceiling of male dominance for the good of the Akan society and the roles and identity of such women should be established to help demystify the misconception about the role and place of women in the Akan society.
- Further study should be conducted on who was Lemuel and who was the woman portrayed as his mother in Proverbs 31:1-9.
- Further study should be conducted on who was king Agur in chapter 30 and whether he was related to Lemuel in any way.

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