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# **The Woman of Worth in Proverbs 31:10–31 Reread through a Bosadi (Womanhood) Lens**

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## **Introduction**

In my research on the Woman of Worth portrayed in Proverbs 31:10–31 (cf Masenya [ngwana' Mphahlele] 1996; 2004), I was fascinated by the gap between biblical scholarship on the pae-an on the one hand, and the lay readers of the Christian Bible (hereinafter referred to as the Bible) such as African women in South Africa, on the other. One such difference is the question of the historicity of the *'eshet hayil* which, as can be expected, is not taken for granted by many a scholar (McCreech 1985; Camp 1985). In this regard Aitken concludes:

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...while there are ordinary points in the portrait which should commend themselves to any housewife—above all that she fears the Lord—as a whole it cannot be read as a kind of blue-print of the ideal Israelite housewife—either for men to measure their wives against or for their wives to try to live up to. (Aitken 1986:158)

Similarly, Crook (1954:139) also concludes: “The Woman of Worth is an ideal; there never was such a person.”

However, among many African-South African lay Bible readers (cf also among some [female] Jewish scholars [Gittay & Gittay 1995; Schaalman 1995]), the historicity of the Woman of Worth is taken for granted. Is it any wonder that in many a church pulpit, preachers and teachers of the Christian Scriptures alike, can easily cite this paean as a text containing a model of the qualities of a godly wife, a model that is presented to their womenfolk to emulate?

What I also found amazing is the apparent lack of interest among gender-sensitive biblical scholars on this particular text. If and when it is engaged with by these scholars, it usually gets little attention as it is discussed within a broader context of the book of Proverbs for example (cf Fontaine 1992; Brenner 2004). Could this lack of interest perhaps be attributed to some of the scholars’ general view that the poem presents wisdom as a woman rather than it being a portrayal of a real human woman? Could it have been motivated by the perception by some of the text’s androcentricity (cf Camp 1995; Brenner 2004; Braude 1995; Weems 1995)? What makes the present essay unique from the previous women scholars’ conversation with Proverbs 31:10–31 is a deliberate foregrounding of the African-South African women’s experiences as hermeneutical lenses through which the paean will be re-read. Such an alternative reading is possible because the poetic nature of the paean under discussion lends itself to a variety of interpretations. Thus, although some scholars argue that Proverbs 31:10–31 presents a picture of an ideal

Israelite woman, such a picture was probably drawn from the everyday lives of the people. Otherwise, the picture might not have made sense to its original hearers or readers. It can thus be assumed that in Israelite/Jewish society (irrespective of whatever *Sitz im leben* scholars assign to the production of the poem), an average woman was expected to meet certain expectations. In this article, I will employ the *bosadi* approach to see which qualities come to light when Proverbs 31:10–31 is reread from the perspective of the experiences of African women in South Africa. As a point of departure, a word about the *bosadi* concept is now in order:

### **A Bosadi Approach**

The Northern Sotho word *bosadi* (womanhood) is an abstract noun which comes from the word *mosadi*. The word *mosadi* can mean ‘woman’, ‘married woman’ or ‘wife’ (cf Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1975:1154; so Brown 1979:217). The word comes from the root *-sadi* which denotes womanhood; the word *bosadi* may for example be translated as ‘womanhood’ or ‘female genitals’.

Though the noun *bosadi* is a Sotho word (Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho and Setswana), it has counterparts in other indigenous languages of South Africa. Examples of the latter include: *musadzi* (TshiVenda), *wa nsati* (Xi-Tsonga), *umfazi* (EsiZulu) and so forth. It thus makes sense that though the Northern Sotho context serves as point of departure in this article as it is my interpretive context, the *bosadi* reading of the qualities of the *'eshet hayil* will make sense within other African-South African settings as well.

I have deliberately elected not to use the word *mosadi* as a key word for my gender framework because the same word can, depending on the context, be used in a derogatory sense. The latter observation reveals the bias that the African culture has against women as seen in the following usage: A man who is referred to as *mosadi*, is despised in one way or

other. The same word however, may be used for praising a woman as in: *O mosadi!* Literally, you are a woman, meaning you deserve praises, you have acted in a womanly (*sesadi*) way!

Furthermore, the word *bosadi* describes what it means to be a woman in the African-South African culture. In the *bosadi* approach, the word *mosadi*, unlike in the traditional sense with its notion of *mosadi* as a married woman, is used to refer to ‘woman’, irrespective of her marital status. In my view, such an understanding of womanhood is helpful because not every woman in society is a wife or aspires to be someone’s wife. It therefore implies that young male and female adults should be freed from marrying if they choose not to. The *bosadi* approach therefore, challenges the idolisation of marriage which is typical in traditional African (and global) cultures (Masenya [ngwan’a Mphahlele] 2007:43–56). It is an indisputable fact that in these cultures, a woman or a man cannot be regarded as a full matured adult apart from (heterosexual) marriage.

A *bosadi* approach thus investigates what liberating womanhood should be for African-South African (women) Bible readers. It seeks to challenge disempowering notions of womanhood as are embedded within the African culture and the broader South African culture (cf Masenya [ngwan’a Mphahlele] 2010:253–272). The approach includes the following elements among others (cf Masenya [ngwan’a Mphahlele] 1996:155–162; 2004; 2005):

- A critique of the oppressive elements of African culture displayed in women’s lives, while reviving aspects that uplift the status of women.
- A critique of the oppressive elements of the Christian Bible, while highlighting its liberating elements.
- The interplay of post-*apartheid* racism, sexism, classism, ethnocentrism and the African culture as significant factors in the interpretive context of an African-South African woman.

- The concept of *botho/ubuntu*, which according to Goduka (1995:2), rests on the African proverb and is an integral part of all African cultures and languages spoken in South Africa. The Northern Sotho saying upon which such a mentality is based is, *motho ke motho ka batho*, which means “I am because we are,” or “we are because I am.” Goduka continues:

The communality, collectivity and the human unity implicit in the proverb operates in the philosophical thought of Africans, and is the guiding principle for relating with other human beings, and forms a basis for thinking, behaving, speaking, teaching and learning, and is devoted to the advancement of human dignity and respect for all.

(1995:2)

Taking the *botho/ubuntu* concept seriously implies that the liberation of all African women in South Africa calls for the involvement of all South Africans irrespective of their race, ethnicity, gender and socio-economic class among others.

- The significance of the family for Africans is also highlighted by the *bosadi* concept. In my view, a gender sensitive perspective that undermines the family and family-oriented matters is not balanced. One should, however, not be misunderstood as advocating that people of either genders are supposed to be bound to the household. One example will suffice in this regard: an African man or woman who opts for domesticity, should not be frowned upon. In that private sphere of the home, he or she is making a valuable contribution to the family.

With the preceding brief analysis of the *bosadi* approach, we now turn to the reading of the paean of Proverbs 31:10–31.

As previously stated, as one rereads the paean of the Woman of Worth in Proverbs, whether one chooses to interpret the image of this woman as that of a real human woman or a literary figure, there appears certain qualities that the community of the poem’s production seems to have expected

from a human woman. As Camp (1995; 1996) has rightly said, the image of an ideal woman as revealed in this paean has not emerged out of a vacuum. The literary figure should be grounded in a particular context. The qualities which emerge from the womanly portrait presented to the Bible readers include among others, the quality of the *'eshet hayil* as household manager, as the woman who fears God; as caring; as industrious as well as her relationship with her husband (cf Masenya 1996:190–204).

In the present article, I will employ the *bosadi* approach to examine the kind of reading that emerges if one engages two such qualities, that is, the quality of the *'eshet hayil* as household manager as well as the portrayal of her relationship with her husband.

## Women: Household Managers

One of the main images of a wife which recurs frequently throughout biblical literature is that of a wife as manager of the household (cf Camp 1985:84). Is it any wonder therefore, that one of the qualities of the Woman of Worth would be that of the controller of all household activities? In my view, this quality almost surpasses all other qualities displayed by the Woman of Worth in Proverbs 31:10–31. The *'eshet hayil* is so preoccupied with the household activities that the house from which she operates is referred to as hers (cf the word בתה in verses 15, 21 and 27).

As part of her household management, the Woman of Worth sees to it that the members of her household, that is, her husband, children and servants, are well-catered for even as she allocates duties to her high quality servants. The latter observation in fact causes one to wonder who actually did the *spade* work? Is it not natural to assume that it is her servants who did the work while she basically managed them? Indeed, everything seems perfect regarding the quality revealed by the woman presented in the poem, something

not amazing given the genre in which such an image is captured.

The *'eshet hayil* also controls the household economy. She does not only consider a field, she buys it and plants a vineyard. She makes linen garments and sells them. The Woman of Worth is not only restricted to the private sphere of the home; she goes out into the public sphere to engage in her business transactions amongst others. If we observe with Rosemary Ruether (1995) though, that the situation portrayed by the paean, is that of a pre-industrial society, it might not be fitting to see a division between the public and private activities of the Woman of Worth here. In pre-industrial societies, the economy of the house formed part of the household. It thus makes sense that a woman as a household manager, would also have been the controller of the household economy (Masenya [ngwana' Mphahlele] 1996:190–193).

Also, worthy of note is the observation that the picture of a woman portrayed by the poet is that of a very rich woman. That makes sense in the context of the elitist status quo displayed by the book. One is here reminded about the words of Fontaine:

Unlike the contents of the Prophets, which is often critical of abuses in society, most of the wisdom traditions of Proverbs are associated with the preservation of the status quo of the male elite. One of the ways this may be observed is through the sages' belief in the act consequence relationship that undergirds much of the thinking in the book ... Though the sages know that the poor may be at the whims of the rich, the act-consequence concept makes it easy to blame victims for having caused their own misfortunes, as is the case in the book of Job. With this kind of worldview, the struggle for social justice lacks the energy and zeal observed elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

(Fontaine 1992:146)

The many activities of the *'eshet hayil* including her purchase and maintenance of the field, her making of high quality clothes and her management of high quality servants, bear witness to her wealth. As can be expected, not all Jewish women in the context of the production of this paean, were like her.

As we bring to a close the analysis of the preceding quality of the *'eshet hayil*, we may note that the quality of the *'eshet hayil* as manager of the household reveals how the post-exilic Jewish community valued the family and how within the family setting, women were highly regarded as homemakers.

Within gender sensitive frameworks such as the *bosadi*, *mujerista*, womanist and feminist ones, what would be pertinent about the definition of womanhood and its roles would be whether the image of the *'eshet hayil* as revealed in the preceding paragraphs is affirming or not, to women. Viewed from a *bosadi* perspective, what prospects does such an image have for the lives of present day African women Bible readers in South Africa? We now turn to this question.

If the image of the Woman of Worth as household manager is reread from a *bosadi* perspective, one gets the following picture: In traditional African-South African (Northern Sotho) culture, women are also viewed as managers of household activities. The Northern Sotho saying: *lapa ke la mosadi*, literally, “a household belongs to a woman” points in that direction. Anything pertaining to the home (for example children, food and utensils among others) are the responsibility of a woman. One must hasten to mention though, that the preceding fact does not mean that a woman controls the household. In our patriarchal contexts, the house belongs to the family head, that is, a woman’s husband, in the case of both monogamous and polygynous marriage settings. So, the African-South African wife will not be manager of the household activities in the same sense as the Woman of Worth was. As previously stated, the Woman of Worth is a rich woman. Given the South African political history in which one’s race also determined

one's socio-economic class, and patriarchy (both in the broader South African community and in the African culture) with its privileging of boy children to girl children, many African women still remain at the bottom of the South African socio-economic ladder. Political liberation for these women, and for many Black South Africans for that matter, had not amounted to socio-economic liberation. The picture of a rich woman who manages so many activities (both within the public and private spheres), will not appeal to these women because the majority of them may never be like the Woman of Worth in their life time. Such an important disjoint between the class of the Woman of Worth and the class(es) of many a modern Bible reader who are usually encouraged to emulate her model, is unfortunately hardly brought forth in our biblical hermeneutics, sermons and bible studies.

One agrees with scholars who view the situation portrayed in Proverbs 31:10–31 as that of the pre-industrial era (cf Ruether 1995; Bird 1995). Worthy of note is the fact that in pre-colonial Africa as well, the household economy formed part of the household. There was thus a slim division between the home (private sphere) and the public sphere (cf Sudarkasa 1994; Rodney 1982). African women have historically been heavily engaged in different economic activities perhaps to a greater extent than women in other parts of the world. The introduction of money as a medium of exchange and the results of colonisation as well as subsequent industrialisation, have meant that relatively greater economic benefits are available to men (Ntiri 1982:14).

The above information on the African pre-colonial setting holds water for the African-South African (Northern Sotho) context. In pre-colonial South Africa, the economy of the household has always formed part of the household, with the division of the public versus the private sphere being slim. Both women and men worked together in the family economy. African women however, made a greater contribution in the fields than men. In some communities though, women

could have more say in what they produced in the fields. In South Africa, the division between the two spheres only became significant with the introduction of capitalist economy by the colonial masters. A new definition of labour as a way of earning money was introduced. Consequently, Western wages (money) were more esteemed than African wages (crops, cattle etc). Work performed in the public sphere mostly by men, thus, came to be more valued than work done in the private sphere of the home by African women. Even the contribution that African (Northern Sotho) women used to make in the agricultural economy of the family, came to be undermined by the capitalistic government as large scale agricultural economy fell into the hands of the few powerful white farmers. African women were and still are, thus left with infertile fields which only yield(ed) (poor) crops in their small scale subsistence farming.

Noteworthy is the observation that capitalistic colonialist economy served to push African women more to the background. Their work, which was solely restricted to the household was devalued. In our view, the South African capitalist economy, with its migratory labour policies, disturbed a very significant institution for Africa, that is, the family (cf Mbiti 1989:104–106). Migrant labour translated into the removal of an African man from his family almost on a permanent basis, a situation that led to an African-South African woman becoming the household manager par excellence because all matters pertaining to family came to be in her care. Not only was the unity of the family disrupted, but the family also lost the dignity and significance it used to have in traditional Africa.

Given the preceding brief background about the African-South African family, it may be argued that being a manager of the household in such a context cannot be viewed as being in a position of weakness. To be a family woman in such a context (cf the *'eshet hayil* of Prov 31:10–31) is in fact, to be in a

position of power (Masenya [ngwana' Mphahlele] 1996:193–195). Why?

- a. Due to the migratory policies of the *apartheid* regime, many African women had to serve and are still serving as both fathers and mothers of families as their husbands had to move to cities to work. The women thus had/have to display good administrative skills for the smooth running of their families. As a matter of fact, a new development of the phenomenon of single parented families complicates this ideal family of Proverbs 31:10–31 even further.
- b. Remaining in the private sphere of the home does not imply passivity or non-action on that part of the woman concerned. No! She also makes a contribution to the family. In my view, engaging in procreation and nurturing, particularly in cultures which set great store by children, like the Hebraic and African cultures, cannot be a position of weakness. In the sense that such a woman is valued more and enjoys a higher status than the one with no children, her position cannot be viewed as a position of weakness. A word of caution is in order though: procreation and nurturing on the part of both women and men is good, but these should not be viewed as normative tasks for *all* women and men. While there is nothing wrong with procreation and nurturing in my opinion, it becomes problematic if such tasks are promoted at all costs; for example, if barrenness or having fewer children are viewed as genuine grounds for divorce. It also becomes problematic, particularly with regard to present day conditions in which more and more women join the public sphere of work, if nurturing is viewed as solely a woman's role. Both working men and women need to help each other in the nurturing of their children.
- c. Remaining at home does not necessarily imply that one is not making a living for the family. Many African women in South Africa operate small business transactions from their homes. They do not necessarily need to go outside the home to work. Thus African women in South Africa (cf

also their African-American sisters) have always worked both inside and outside of their homes.

- d. Just like the '*eshet hayil* who operates from behind closed doors and makes her husband successful at the city gates, thus actually wielding power invisibly, the success of the public occupation of many African men, be they migrant labourers or those whose work places are not far from their houses, depends on the efficiency of women who control the households when they are away.

In light of the information in the preceding paragraphs, it may be argued that the quality of the Woman of Worth as a household manager if viewed from a *bosadi* perspective, may offer liberating possibilities for African (Northern Sotho) women in South Africa because:

- a. The quality reminds all Africans in South Africa to revive the lost mentality of family that traditional Africans used to enjoy. As the basic unit of each society, the family needs to be respected. Also, anyone (male or female) who chooses the private sphere as a place of work should not be despised as he/she is also making a valuable contribution in there.
- b. The quality of the woman as household manager serves to rectify an exaggerated perception that African-South African women are oppressed. The challenge with the use of the verb 'oppress' is that it implies powerlessness. African women in South Africa are not wholly devoid of power. Their power, though, is not legitimated in a patriarchal culture (both during and after *apartheid*). However, the home is the sphere in which an African woman's power is recognised. In the *bosadi* view of things, a home should be viewed as a sphere of operation for anyone who chooses to operate from there, not solely a womanly sphere as it used to be perceived in our traditional contexts and even today in many a family setting. In the family, there needs to be an equal division of labour between family members, irrespective of their genders. Such an even distribution of

labour is commendable particularly in situations where both husband and wife work in the public sphere. This will alleviate the burden of work that working African women experience today.

As already noted, the portrait of a rich woman who manages the activities of a very complex household cannot be affirming to many an African woman who remains at the bottom of the society's socio-economic ladder. Proverbs 31:10–31 may be viewed as a text relevant for the haves of our day even as it was probably used by the haves of its time. What does a poor woman have in such a text? This may be a question from a despondent modern day reader of the paean. The quality of the Woman of Worth as manager of the household in which she lives therefore has both liberating and subordinating possibilities if viewed from a *bosadi* perspective.

We now turn to one last observation that may reveal an aspect of the Woman of Worth's identity as a woman, that is, her position in relation to her husband. Which possibilities will such an identity offer, if read through a *bosadi* perspective?

## The Woman of Worth and Her Husband

One of the main criticisms of feminist scholars about the image of the *'eshet hayil* is that she is not independent. It is argued that the Woman of Worth is defined in terms of her husband and her actions are geared at enhancing her husband's status. In Proverbs 31:11–12 for example, it is revealed that the Woman of Worth's husband has confidence in her because she does him good all the days of her life. In verse 23, her husband is portrayed as being respected at the city gates on account of her. Worthy of note is that the above verses, which seem to depict the "dependent" status of the Woman of Worth according to these scholars, may be interpreted by some scholars (cf Gittay & Gittay 1995) to reveal the power and the independence of the Woman of Worth. The fact that her husband trusts in her as she does him good all the days of her life, according

to these scholars, shows that in fact the present paean reveals a powerful woman, one who can be trusted by a respectable man in Israel's social order, a man who 'sits at the gates'. This same woman is such an influential figure in the family that her influence is felt at the very gates! Her husband is respected at the gates because of her. This is definitely no mean figure! The preceding observation though, makes sense because in a family-oriented patriarchal society like Israel, it would not make sense to praise a wife in isolation from her husband and her children. One cannot challenge a situation where a wife does good to her husband in their marital context, the challenge however comes in if the goodness is always expected from one party—either the woman or the man.

It must also be admitted that the paean of Proverbs 31:10–31 does not give us a complete picture of the actual context of an Israelite/Jewish marriage setting as it was basically written from a male perspective. Had the biblical authors also included a poem in praise of a good husband, it would probably also foreground the good qualities of the husband and the good he does for his wife without necessarily implying that he is defined in terms of his wife.

In my view, the evidence in the poem which seems to highlight the androcentric nature of the text is the naming of the husband of this powerful, independent woman as her בעל (*ba'al*), master or owner. The word אישה, her man, might have suited the context better. This does not, however, mean that one endorses the problematic term בעל (*ba'al*) if used in other contexts. In my view, the designation *ba'al* denies a woman her full personhood because it implies the property-status of a woman, that is, one who can be owned by her male master! Though such a naming makes sense in a culture that is patriarchal, it must be challenged and resisted.

The other problematic aspect of the relations between men and women notable in the poem is that of a separation between a public male (significant) sphere—the city gates—and the domestic female sphere. At the city gates, national issues

relating to politics and justice were discussed and settled. Unfortunately, women scarcely, if at all, participated in that sphere. Though we acknowledge that the Woman of Worth, through the exercise of her indirect power, did make a contribution in that sphere, it would have done Israelite/Judahite society good to allow any efficient person to participate at the gates of the city—irrespective of whether the person was rural or urban, poor or rich, foreigner who had joined the Israelite society or ‘true’ Jew, female or male. At the same time, it would have done the society justice if both men and women could have participated together in household activities.

The issue of the city gates reminds one of the traditional Northern Sotho *kgoro*—a meeting place of men, lineal group and clan (cf Ziervogel and Mokgokong 1975). As one might expect in a Northern Sotho patriarchal culture, except in the Lobedu context in which the Queen Mother still plays a significant role in the affairs of the community, a *kgoro* is constituted by men. A woman could only participate if there was a need, for example, if she had a case against someone. Despite the fact that she did not participate actively in matters pertaining to the *kgoro*, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that just like the Woman of Worth, the African-South African (Northern Sotho) woman’s influence (indirect use of power) could also be felt even there. From the Northern Sotho proverbs, it becomes clear that society was aware that women could defeat (control?) their husbands even if they were not strong physically. The proverb, *naswa ya mošate e fenyā e sa rage*, translated, “a black royal cow prevails (against its adversary) even if it does not kick,” has said it all (cf Masenya [ngwana’ Mphahlele] 1996:178). A *kgoro* is a traditional place where disputes are settled. It is from this place that the *kgōši* (traditional leader) and his *bakgoma* (royal subjects) rule the people. From the Northern Sotho proverbs, what is also notable is that there is a negative stereotype about women, that is, that they cannot lead. It thus becomes understandable that in a patriarchal Northern Sotho culture, just like in the Israelite culture, only

men would be allowed to sit at the city gates. This was also the case with the South African *apartheid* government. It was basically constituted by men. Such a mentality that denies women their capacity for political leadership, should be challenged. The present post-*apartheid* government is to be commended for challenging such a stereotype by putting some women in high ranking political positions, thus recognising the dignity of all human beings, including women.

The portrayal of the '*eshet hayil*'s relationship with her husband can be problematic for African-South African women readers of the paean because it entrenches the patriarchal stereotypes of women as men's properties as well as women's incapacity to participate actively in the public sphere of work, such as the political sphere.

## Conclusion

Our interaction with the (literary) woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 when approached from a *bosadi* perspective has revealed the following aspects about womanhood:

The image of the Woman of Worth as household manager can be both empowering and disempowering for African women in South Africa on account of the following observations: On the one hand, her image is disempowering because in spite of the household being designated as hers (cf the word בַּתּוֹךְ in verses 15, 21 and 27), the poet still views her as her husband's property (cf his use of the word בַּעַל [*ba'al*] to refer to her husband). As the poet does that, the patriarchal order remains entrenched, though subverted by a powerful woman whose many activities are fore grounded. Also, the image of a very rich woman with high quality servants can never serve as a model in our poverty-ridden contexts (cf Africa-South Africa and the rest of the African continent). Such an observation must sensitise preachers, theologians and the laity alike, those entrusted with interpretive authority to be cautious of

not indiscriminately applying elitist texts to poor (women) Bible readers.

On the other hand, the image of the *'eshet hayil* may be empowering for African-South African Bible readers if we insist that many an African-South African woman are household managers par excellence (cf the Migrant Labour Act of the *apartheid* era, whose legacy continues to haunt us even up to today). Also, the growing (global) phenomenon of female single-parented families sheds light on the capacity of women to be worthy household managers. Such observations also problematizes the *ideal* family presented by the author of our paeon, that of a wife, *husband* and children.

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