

## **The Dissolution of the Monarchy, the Collapse of the Temple and the “Elevation” of Women in the Post-Exilic Period: Any Relevance for African Women’s Theologies?**<sup>1</sup>

**MADIPOANE MASENYA (NGWAN’A MPHACHELE) (UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA)**

### ***ABSTRACT***

*The profound changes which accompanied state formation in ancient Israel would have had a profound impact on the gender parity which, according to some feminist scholars, typified the settlement period. In the absence of the monarchy and the Jerusalem temple during the post-exilic period, the family, with woman as household manager, regained significance as the locus of divine authority. Based on the preceding claims, scholars such as Claudia Camp and Tamara Eskenazi argue that women’s status was elevated during the post-exilic period. With the views of such scholars in mind and given the place enjoyed by the Christian Bible in many an African context, the present article will engage the following main questions: Could biblical women’s lives have something positive to offer to African women today? If the alleged elevated status of women was usually linked with woman’s position in the family, could such a link enable a woman-affirming African women’s theology on the family?*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

The systems of colonialism and *apartheid* in South Africa found a limping animal but still let it climb a mountain! On account of gender disparities among others, African women’s situation in the patriarchal, pre-colonial South Africa can be compared with that of a limping animal. The afore-mentioned systems, supported by a particular biblical hermeneutic and the emasculation of African men among others, served to aggravate the already vulnerable situation of women.

*Wa re o e bona e hlotša, wa e nametša thaba* is a proverb which reveals that a specific situation is being exacerbated. “When you saw it (the cow) limping, you still let it climb the mountain” is its literal meaning. The proverb comes to mind when the dynamics of power, economics, politics, religion and

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gender in ancient Israel are analysed. During the settlement period, the family household was the key entity in providing for almost all the needs of the members.<sup>2</sup> With women as household managers and the many roles which they played towards the households' overall well-being, it makes sense that some scholars would argue that there was egalitarianism between women and men during the same period. However, with the introduction of male-controlled institutions such as the monarchy and the Jerusalem temple, female visibility and impact receded, and the limping animal was thus made to go uphill.

In the present article, I present the claims by scholars such as Camp and Eskenazi on the elevated status of women in Yehud. Attention will thus be given to female and family imagery in the book of Proverbs<sup>3</sup> as well as selected texts from Ezra-Nehemiah.<sup>4</sup>

First, I give a brief background to the complexities brought about by the monarchy in Israel, complexities which allegedly tampered with the relative gender parity of the settlement period. I then engage the afore-mentioned scholars' works and conclude by suggesting the implications of women's alleged elevated status in Yehud for the construction of a woman-friendly African biblical hermeneutic.

## B ON WOMEN'S "ELEVATED" STATUS DURING THE SETTLEMENT PERIOD

According to Meyers, the pioneering conditions during the settlement period enabled some form of egalitarianism between women and men<sup>5</sup>. Throughout

<sup>2</sup> Carol L. Meyers, "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible," in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol. A. Newsom and Sharon. H. Ringe; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 248-249; Carol L. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47-71.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Claudia C. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Almond: JSOT Press, 1985), 69-147.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Tamara C. Eskenazi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon. H. Ringe, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 116-123 ; Camp, "Wisdom and the Feminine," 116-122.

<sup>5</sup> The following examples come to mind: the *pilegesh* of Judg 19 with her courage to go back to her father's household (Judg 19:2), Deborah the judge and the prophetess (Judg 4:4-10; 5:7, 12-15); Jephthah's daughter with her "initiation" of the annual mourning ritual for daughters (Judg 11:34-40). Meyers's basic aim was to reveal the unacknowledged yet important roles which Israelite women played during the pioneering conditions of the settlement period. Such female social, economic and religious roles were however linked to the household. Without women's active roles in such basic yet unrecognised activities, life would have been impossible. Whether serving faithfully as household managers of a patriarchal household could be regarded

the years, Israelite economy firmly relied on agriculture. The hard work of farm families was thus pivotal for the successful running of a family household. As both a biological and economic unit, the household produced and processed all the food, clothing and implements, (except metal items), necessary for people's survival in the Palestinian highlands.<sup>6</sup> A similar situation is clearly visible in the portrait of the *'ēšet hayil* in Prov 31:10-31. Such apparent points of resemblance throw light on the commonalities between the settlement period conditions and the post-exilic period ones.<sup>7</sup>

Women's economic roles included outdoor farm work. Consequently planting, weeding and harvesting all depended on their involvement. As their tasks had to be compatible with child care, women were actively involved in gardening. The cultivation of fruit trees, vines, vegetables and herbs rather than field crops, took a significant portion of the time women spent outdoors.<sup>8</sup>

For food to be edible, it had to be processed. Women were thus involved in the time-consuming series of needed operations like soaking, milling, grounding and baking prior to food consumption. They were often engaged in the time consuming aspects of the provision of clothing such as the shearing of wool, the preparation of flax, the carding and spinning of thread, cloth weaving and the sewing of garments. Meyers reasons that on the average, for much of the year, many hours in a day would have been invested by Israelite women in some aspect of clothing manufacture.<sup>9</sup> Two features come to light regarding women's economic involvement, first, they spent many hours in life-supporting activities per day and second, many of their tasks, if not all, involved some degree of technological expertise.<sup>10</sup>

Like in any other pioneering (and even non-pioneering contexts), Israelite women's roles as mothers and carers of children were pertinent. Meyers argues: "The *raison d'être* for large families was the labour-intensive nature of the agricultural economy of ancient Israel." Noteworthy is that women's motherly role was linked with their educative tasks. However, according to Meyers:

This educative role is not directly visible in scripture, where the presence of sages and elders gives the impression of a male monopoly on the teaching and inculcating of traditional practices and beliefs. Yet the day-to-day interactions of mothers with children in

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as revealing some form of egalitarianism between women and men, will hopefully unfold during the course of the present text.

<sup>6</sup> Meyers, "Everyday Life," 246.

<sup>7</sup> Tamara C. Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows: Biblical Women in the Postexilic Era," *JSOT* 54 (1992): 33.

<sup>8</sup> Meyers, "Everyday Life," 246-247.

<sup>9</sup> Meyers, "Everyday Life," 247.

<sup>10</sup> Meyers, "Everyday Life," 247.

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the household were of foundational significance in passing most aspects of Israelite culture from one generation to the next.<sup>11</sup>

Israelite women also had a share in the religious sphere. They participated in the multi-faceted religious life as organisers and participants in household based festivals. The following examples are noteworthy: Deborah received honour as a "mother in Israel" (Judg 5:7); as a judge and a prophet who at Yahweh's command summoned Israelite forces to war and accompanied them to the battle (Judg 4:4-10; 5:7, 12-15); Jephthah's virgin daughter "initiated" an annual ritual of mourning by Israelite daughters (Judg 11:34-40); Micah's mother commissioned an image for the shrine of the family. The latter was established by her son (Judg 17:1-13) and women as dancers at the yearly feast at Shiloh (Judg 21:19-21).<sup>12</sup> The great hymns which were sung by them in celebration of Israel's victory (Judg 5) come to mind.<sup>13</sup>

Bird<sup>14</sup> also reminds us of women's religious activities within the hidden spheres of the home: "Of possibly greater significance for an understanding of women's religious participation and the total religious life of the community is the hidden reality of women's rituals and devotions which take place entirely within the domestic sphere and/or in the company of other women."<sup>15</sup> Such activities become even more critical, particularly where women are excluded from the central cultus.

The present South African context is not the same as the settlement period with its pioneering conditions, a blurred separation between the public and private spheres and a household economy whose success depended on women's tireless efforts. We may thus not appreciate the conditions as we ought to. However, if understood first and foremost within the context of their own time, the issue of gender parity raised by Meyers might make some sense. Men also played roles as hunters, protectors (cf. the military) and heads of

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<sup>11</sup> Meyers, "Everyday Life," 249. Small glimpses of a mother's role in the educative lives of children is notable in some of the proverbs in which both mother and father appear as a pair in the context of their parental responsibility (cf. Prov 1:8; 4:3;10:1). The unusual Instruction by a mother (cf. Lemuel's Queen mother in Prov 31:1-9), also points in that direction. For a more elaborate study on the educative role of both mother and father within a family context, cf. Madipoane J. Masenya, "In the School of Wisdom: An Interpretation of Some Old Testament Proverbs in a Northern Sotho Context," (M.A. diss., University of South Africa, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Phyllis Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 47.

<sup>13</sup> Meyers, "Everyday Life," 249.

<sup>14</sup> Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities*, 100.

<sup>15</sup> Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities*, 100.

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households among others. For Meyers though, the work of women was at certain points more demanding and required some technological expertise.<sup>16</sup>

Given the active role which Israelite women played towards the overall welfare of the household unit, it occasions no surprise that scholars such as Meyers could claim that there was some egalitarianism between women and men during the settlement period? What is questionable though is the possibility of gender parity within a patriarchal household. The latter was a context in which despite the major role played by women in the household economy, they had no say in the distribution and inheritance of assets. The monarchy thus found a limping animal but still let it go uphill. How so? We now turn to this question.

### **C THE MONARCHY FORCES A LIMPING ANIMAL UPHILL**

The apparent<sup>17</sup> gender parity during the settlement period was not to last long though. It was eroded by the complex forces which accompanied the formation and development of the Israelite state. The monarchy became a watershed event in the formation of hierarchies in ancient Israel. With the household losing power as the locus of authority, the relative gender parity was seriously tampered with.

Schlegel offers a helpful remark about forces leading to sexual stratification from a cross-cultural perspective. In her view, differentiation in sex roles is a response to both the internal dynamic of a society and to the external conditions to which a society must respond. It thus becomes pertinent to examine critically society's central institutions and the degree to which they favour one sex or the other: "Where the household or lineage is central, as it is among the Hopi and the Bontoc, or where the economic system involves more or less equal tasks and decision making roles, as on the Barbadian plantation or in the Israeli kibbutz, the relation between the sexes tends to be balanced and complementary."<sup>18</sup> The preceding situation compares to that of the settlement period. However, Schlegel further argues ... "Where economic production favours male control, as in colonial Ghana, or where male-controlled military

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<sup>16</sup> Meyers, "Everyday Life," 247.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to qualify and /or problematise the alleged gender parity between women and men during the settlement period. Glimpses of how patriarchy manifested itself through violent masculinities displayed on women's lives in the same period, can be obtained from the book of Judges. Examples include but are not limited to the concubine wife of the Levite who was raped and dismembered in Judg 19; the abduction and rape of the young women of Shiloh (Judg 21) and the murder of the innocent daughter of Jephthah. The preceding examples confirm that although women did play very basic, yet unacknowledged roles in the lives the Israelites at that time, they also remained objects for men's abuse at men saw fit.

<sup>18</sup> Alice Schlegel, "An Overview," in *Sexual Stratification: A Cross-Cultural View* (ed. Alice Schlegel; New York/Guilford: Columbia University Press, 1977), 354-355.

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activities are central, as in the feuding pattern among Israeli Arab clans, male activities become predominant and men come to be the primary decision makers in almost all aspects of social life."<sup>19</sup> The latter can be likened to that of monarchic Israel.

With the formation and rise of the state, there was a shift in the locus of power from the family household in which women played significant roles to a male-controlled public world. The nation state led to the growing prominence of the military, the growth of the state and religious bureaucracies with a hold on economic development. Whenever such male-controlled public institutions become significant, female prestige and power recede.<sup>20</sup>

A local comparable example comes to mind: in pre-colonial South Africa, the economy of the household has always formed part of the patriarchal household. The division of the public versus the private spheres was thus slim. Women's contributions towards the household economy were valued. The division between the two spheres only became significant with the introduction of capitalist economy by colonialists. Consequently, a new definition of labour as a way of earning money was introduced. The preceding situation resulted in Western wages (money) becoming more esteemed than African wages (crops, cattle among others). Also, work performed in the public male sphere became more valued than work done in the private female sphere. Even African women's contribution in the family's agricultural economy became undermined by the capitalistic government as large scale agricultural economy fell into the hands of the powerful few.<sup>21</sup>

With the centralisation of political power during the monarchy though, the powers of the father-husband as well as the local loyalties to extended family, clan or tribe, were weakened.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the important activities which were performed in the patriarchal household during the settlement period became less and devalued as compared to the male activities of the public male-operated sphere. There also came a shift from the village to the city with its repercussions for the inactive role particularly of the wives of the elites towards the economy of the country.<sup>23</sup> The monarchy also served to further marginalise women religiously in terms of their formal exclusion from signifi-

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<sup>19</sup> Schlegel, "An Overview," 354-355.

<sup>20</sup> Meyers, "Discovering Eve," 190.

<sup>21</sup> Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), *How Worthy is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in African-South Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 147.

<sup>22</sup> Naomi Steinberg, "The Deuteronomic Law Code and the Politics of State Centralization," in *The Bible and Liberation* (ed. Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley; Orbis Books: Maryknoll, 1993), 365.

<sup>23</sup> Meyers, "Discovering Eve," 191.

cant temple duties. It must however be acknowledged with Bird<sup>24</sup> that "... the (Israelite) cultus (was) an originally or essentially, male institution or association." Using the proverbial limping animal as an analogy, we may argue that the establishment of the temple served to let the animal go uphill as in the following examples: it meant the employment of male priests. The purification laws would then officially form part of an established religious institution, laws which scrutinised and sanctioned female biology to women's detriment. The effects of such laws continue to be felt by us even today.<sup>25</sup> In Bird's view, the progressive movement from multiple cultic centres to a central site which ultimately claimed sole legitimacy and control over certain ritual events necessarily led to the limiting of women's participation in pilgrim feasts. It also restricted women's opportunities to seek guidance, release and consolation at local shrines.<sup>26</sup>

However, with the dissolution of the monarchy and the collapse of the temple, a new situation arose, one almost akin to that of the settlement period. The family regained power as a locus of authority. Hence, the claims by Camp and Eskenazi that the post-exilic period marked an era in which women's status became elevated. In the next sections, I present cases from the book of Proverbs and Ezra-Nehemiah to illustrate their claim.

## D WOMEN'S IMAGES IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

In Proverbs, more clearly than anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, the resurgence of the socio-religious significance of the family becomes notable.<sup>27</sup> Two major issues were significant for the returnees.<sup>28</sup> First, a need arose for a functional family household to accomplish survival tasks and to rebuild society. Within a divided and contentious community, clear evidence of family identity was needed to establish claims to land and political power.<sup>29</sup> Second, a need

<sup>24</sup> Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities*, 89.

<sup>25</sup> It is important to note with Bird that women were not excluded from participation within the religious sphere. Their participation though, was not full. She argues: "The women shared many of the same rights and duties as men, made use of the same aid provided or mediated by the institutions, and as men, were held accountable by them. Women, in common with men, prayed, consulted oracles, attended festivals, and sought justice in the courts, received theophanies and divine commissions, sought oracular judgements and legal redress for wrongs suffered and received punishment for wrongs committed. It appears that they were not as a rule prohibited from general religious practices but rather were hindered from fuller participation by competing interest or duty..." (Bird, "Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities," 90).

<sup>26</sup> Bird, "Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities," 102.

<sup>27</sup> Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 250.

<sup>28</sup> Claudia V. Camp, "What is so Strange about the Strange Woman," in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis* (ed. David. Jobling, Peggy. L. Day and Gerald. T. Sheppard; Cleveland: The Pilgrim, 1991), 17-18.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. also Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 239-242.

arose for the promulgation of pure and proper worship of YHWH, devoid of foreign cultic practice. Both issues were closely linked and reached moments of crisis as some members of the *Golah* married into foreign families. Foreign marriage, notes Camp,<sup>30</sup> brought the danger of foreign gods, even as it threatened the family's stability. Proverbs' direct support of the individual family's integrity, contributes to its indirect support of the community's covenant relationship with God, the book's significant function as part of Israel's authoritative literature.<sup>31</sup> The final level of redaction which is notable in 1:6; 6:20; 23:22-25 and 31:10-31, which all include the mother's instruction along with the father's and the rare instruction by the mother (cf. 31:1-9), is the familial setting. One of the sages' clear goal was the inculcation of family values as the foundation for a workable social organisation. Camp<sup>32</sup> then concludes:

The themes and organization of the book of Proverbs thus reflect and support the renewed recognition accorded to the importance of the family in the kingless sociological configuration of the exilic and post-exilic period.

To achieve that, the book's redactor, has not merely stressed family imagery but specifically, female imagery. According to Camp,<sup>33</sup> an increased status of women is notable because: first, projects of rebuilding houses, the temple, the walls and the buildings of Jerusalem necessitated the involvement of men and women (Neh 3:12).<sup>34</sup> Second, as men had to be involved in the guerrilla attacks against Sanballat (Neh 4:10-12), women would have to work harder in the tasks of building and food production.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that women are explicitly included as members of the covenantal community and worshipping congregation, along with men (cf. Neh 1:2-3; Lev 13:29,38) also bears witness to their improved status.<sup>36</sup> With the autonomy and decision-making authority flowing back to the collocation of families from the ruined central power structure, the community-wide authority of women as household managers would also increase.<sup>37</sup>

With the restoration of the significance attached to the family and a woman as the traditional household manager, plus the alleged increased status of women during this time, it stands to reason that Proverbs' redactor would have elevated not just family imagery but female imagery. The efficient management of the family by a woman would have led to the family stability, an

<sup>30</sup> Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 251.

<sup>32</sup> Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 253.

<sup>33</sup> Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 258-261.

<sup>34</sup> Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 25-43.

<sup>35</sup> Meyers, "Discovering Eve," 576-582.

<sup>36</sup> Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 259; Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 25-43.

<sup>37</sup> Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 260.

invaluable ingredient for a family at that time. It thus becomes significant that not only a father but also a mother, the traditional nurturer of children<sup>38</sup>, is made visible as the teacher of children. Proper education of children would also affect the family's stability. With the family as the focal point, it becomes reasonable that a book which was written by men from their perspectives would have emphasised the need for good wives to facilitate the "proper" management of the family.

The image of Woman Stranger in Prov 1-9 also becomes clearer within such a setting. Whatever they stand for, whether strangers to Israelite traditions, or harlots or adulteresses, strange women would tamper with the stability of the Israelite family. For example, once a wife was an adulteress, her covenantal and her family's relationship with YHWH would be disturbed and the family's stability and that of the nation would be negatively affected. Such a situation which would not have been accommodated during the post-exilic period.

Camp<sup>39</sup> argues, regarding Woman Stranger in Prov 7 that we are confronting a socio-psychological reality of men who were threatened by a multiple stressed situation which included internal religio-political power struggles, economically oppressive foreign rule and the pressures of cultural assimilation. All these were projected onto the symbol of a woman, that is, Woman Stranger. Woman Stranger as portrayed in Prov 1-9 is thus a multivalent symbol who represents various issues. Washington says: "Because of the composite nature of her portrait, the proscribed figure has no consistent identity, and sexual slur is only the most prominent of a variety of tactics used to disparage her."<sup>40</sup>

Even the adjective זר appears to be vague because it denotes "otherness," that is, what is outside a field of recognition or of legitimacy.<sup>41</sup> An important question to ask is: Who were these "others"/"foreigners" who are symbolised by the metaphor of Woman Stranger? Does the metaphor refer to real women who were foreign to Israel (e.g., the Moabites and Ammonites)? Were they Israelite women whose lives were foreign to Israel's traditions? Could it have meant the non-הָלָה Jews who were considered by others as not true Jews? We pursue the last question. Some of the scholarship on Proverbs agrees that there was a tension between the returnees, who formed the Temple community, and who therefore claimed true Jewish identity to themselves, and

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Carol R. Fontaine, "The Sage in Family and Tribe," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John. Gammie and Leo. G. Perdue; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 161.

<sup>39</sup> Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Harold C. Washington, "The Strange Woman (נָכְרִיה/זְרוֹה אֲשֶׁר) of Proverbs 1-9," in *Temple Community in the Persian Period* (vol. 2 of *Second Temple Studies*; ed. Tamara C. Eskenazi and Kent. C. Richards; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 229.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Washington, "The Strange Woman," 229.

those who remained in the land, sometimes referred to as "peoples of the land."<sup>42</sup> Washington reasons:

By referring to the local non-הָלָה Judaeans as "peoples of the land(s)," the returning exiles effectively classified their Judaean rivals, together with the neighbouring non-Judaean peoples (Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, residents of Samaria, etc.), as alien to Israel.<sup>43</sup>

It was the leaders of the post-exilic community who, through their administration of the genealogical registry, had a decisive influence in the debate over the identity of the true Israel in defining who would belong to its temple and who would possess its land.<sup>44</sup>

Coupled with the issue of the land tenure system and real property holdings of the Judean collective, was the threat of marriage to women who were not *true* Jews, that is foreign wives. Such a fear was caused by the fact that within the patrilineal land tenure system, women were capable of inheriting and disposing of property (cf. the case of Zelophehad's daughters in Num 27:1-1; 36:1-9). Hence marriage to foreign women could entitle the non-Jews to the Jewish heritage. Eskenazi, basing her arguments on the documents of Jews in Elephantine argues that during the same period, daughters, even if they had male siblings, could inherit property.<sup>45</sup> Ezra-Nehemiah's marriage reforms become understandable when viewed against such a background.<sup>46</sup> As readers of Proverbs, we are thus faced with a situation where a combination of socio-economic, socio-political and socio-religious forces is projected onto a female figure, that is, Woman Stranger. In my view, Woman Stranger, whatever she stood for, reveals that women in that context were not chattel. Women were a major force to reckon with. If this had not been the case, the sages would not have dedicated so much space on female imagery, whether negative or positive. Although women are viewed as property, they have the power to frustrate the

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Richard A. Horsley, "Empire, Temple and Community – but no Bourgeoisie! A Response to Blenkinsopp and Petersen," in *Persian Period* (vol. 2 of *Second Temple Studies*; ed. Philip R. Davies; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 163-174; Washington, "The Strange Woman," 215-242; Tamara C. Eskenazi and Eleanore P. Judd, "Marriage to a Stranger in Ezra 9-10," in *Temple Community in the Persian Period* (vol. 2 of *Second Temple Studies*; ed. Tamara. C. Eskenazi and Kent. H. Richards; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 266-285.

<sup>43</sup> Washington, "The Strange Woman," 232-233.

<sup>44</sup> Washington, "The Strange Woman," 234-235.

<sup>45</sup> Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 25-43.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 258-261; Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 25-43; Eskenazi and Judd, "Marriage to a Stranger in Ezra 9-10," 266-285; Washington, "The Strange Woman," 215-242.

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patriarchal lineage if they wish. Even though they are viewed as secondary, the human lineage cannot continue without them."<sup>47</sup>

How may we understand the key female figures, which are the Woman of Worth, the household manager par excellence and Woman Stranger, the symbol of chaos in light of the identity crisis explained above? Two answers can be proposed:

On the one hand, if we understand the Woman of Worth to represent an ideal type of woman that every *true* Israelite man had to strive for, we may assume that her portrait was indirectly meant to warn Israelite men against foreign women. The latter category included women who were not regarded as true Jews. Such an assumption reveals the androcentricity of Prov 31:10-31, a text from the hands of "true" Jewish men who desired to have "true Jewish women" to maintain amongst others, ideological purity.

On the other hand, if we understand the Woman of Worth to be a symbol of wisdom, we may assume that the poem served the purpose of revealing that a true Jew was one who possessed Wisdom. The latter, is equated with the fear of Yahweh in Prov 1:7. A true Jew would thus be one who respected Yahweh, hence the religious overtones. The second explanation is more inclusive.

In Yehud, women were a powerful threat to the *kyriarchal* status quo. On the one hand, marriages with women who were deemed foreign, symbolised by Woman Stranger, could disrupt the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-religious lives of a "true" Jew and ultimately of the whole nation because the family was a basic unit of society. The emphasis on good and bad women and the book's ending with a poem in praise of an ideal woman make sense in such a context. Men had to strive for the ideal, whatever it stood for, to maintain the status quo.

Camp's theory <sup>48</sup> of the family's resurgence, not only as the primary socio-economic unit but also as a locus of the manifestation of God's blessings as grounds for the foregrounding of female (women) imagery in Proverbs, also makes sense. Indeed, one cannot fail to question why a text from a patriarchal culture has a tendency to "elevate" females, even to the extent of defining Woman Wisdom as the daughter of YHWH! (cf. Prov 8). However, we need to be careful of too easily embracing patriarchy's definition of success. Does the fact that the book foregrounds female imagery (wives, mothers, Woman Wisdom, etc.) imply the elevated status of these figures? From whose viewpoint

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<sup>47</sup> Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Polluting your Ground? Woman as pollutant in Yehud: A Reading from a Globalised Africa," in *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan* (ed. McGlory T. Speckman and Larry. T. Kaufmann; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001), 196.

<sup>48</sup> Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 263.

are these female figures portrayed? Such questions are necessitated by a hermeneutic of suspicion with which, gender sensitive biblical scholars approach the text with a view to unmasking whatever ideological bias the text might have.

We now turn to the text of Ezra-Nehemiah:

#### E INSIGHTS FROM EZRA-NEHEMIAH

Tamara Eskenazi opines that the egalitarianism which existed between women and men during the settlement period, also typified the Second Temple community of the Achaemenid period.<sup>49</sup> If, as Meyers holds, more focus on family in pre-monarchic Israel meant more equitable distribution of power for women, then the re-emergence of the family as an important socio-economic unit in the post-exilic era, also leads to greater power for women compared to their situation during the monarchy. Once again, pioneer life conditions typify Judean reality, even as the population is once more primarily rural. The community once more experiences an era when internal boundaries are in flux. If Meyers's thesis correctly describes pre-monarchic Israel, Eskenazi is of the view that it also supports a measure of egalitarianism in postexilic Judah.<sup>50</sup> She uses evidence from two sources in order to support her claim on the elevated status of women in Yehud, first, evidence from the Elephantine Jews and second, evidence from Ezra-Nehemiah. For the purposes of the present article, focus will be on the latter.

Based on the evidence from Jewish women's lives in the Elephantine documents, that women could inherit property, Eskenazi agrees with scholars who see the motive behind the sanction of marriages with foreign wives as having had to do with economics, specifically, the land issue.<sup>51</sup> She reasons that: "The fear of mixed marriages with their concomitant loss of property to the community makes most sense when women can, in fact inherit. Such loss would not be possible when women did not have legal rights to their husbands' or fathers' land."<sup>52</sup>

She recovers some of the hidden women by lifting Ezra 2:55 with its mention of the descendants of *hassōperet* (*sōperet* in Neh 5:57). The literal meaning of the word is "the female scribe." The latter has been glossed over or misinterpreted particularly by some male commentators through the years. Also among the returnees' lists, mention is made of male and female slaves and male and female singers (Ezra 2:65 // Neh 6:67).<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Cf Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 25-43.

<sup>50</sup> Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 25-43.

<sup>51</sup> Eskenazi, "Out of the Shadows," 25-43

<sup>52</sup> Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 35.

<sup>53</sup> Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 38.

Reference is also made to the women who were involved in the building of the walls as in Neh 3:12, "Next to him...Shallum repaired - he and his daughters ...."<sup>54</sup> Eskenazi notes a sentence which has equally become an irritation to the male commentators as in the following example: "...The meaning is really unknown."<sup>55</sup> From the examined lists, women thus appear during key events in Judean history, that is, the return from exile and the building of the city walls.<sup>56</sup> Although the references to women according to Eskenazi do not reveal gender balance, they do show women's presence in symbolic and practical ways.<sup>57</sup>

Among notable women figures during this period, is the prophetess Noadiah. Nothing is mentioned about Noadiah apart from her being part of the opposition to Nehemiah. Carroll chooses to fill the gap left by Nehemiah about the prophetess by suggesting that Noadiah could have resisted the imperial policies of Persia and their unfriendliness not only to women's lives, but also to the lives of those on the margins. He remarks: "It seems to me patently obvious that anybody rebuilding Jerusalem in order to make the Temple community secure on behalf of the Persian authorities must have attracted considerable and justified criticism. It was a project which just repeated the past and excluded far too many people."<sup>58</sup> In her attempt at reconstructing the identity of Noadiah, Eskenazi further notes that the fact that Noadiah could be mentioned alongside the likes of Tobiah, the Ammonite and Sanballat, Samaria's governor, could reveal that she was as prominent as they were.<sup>59</sup> She also notes women's presence at what she calls the climax of the restoration where women are part and parcel of the *qahal*, a congregation constituted for official purposes (cf. Deut 31:9-13). In her view, religious egalitarianism is revealed by the fact that women's presence is explicitly and emphatically acknowledged.<sup>60</sup> She reasons: "Men and women gathered; men and women heard and heeded; men and women celebrated. The teaching of God belonged to the entire community."<sup>61</sup> Indeed, compared to the invisibility of women within the hierarchical arrangements of the monarchic period, Eskenazi's observations and findings enable us

<sup>54</sup> Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 39; cf. Camp, "Wisdom and the Feminine," 258-261.

<sup>55</sup> Loring W. Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (ICC; New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1913), 213-214 as quoted by Eskenazi, "Out of the Shadows," 40.

<sup>56</sup> Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 40.

<sup>57</sup> Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 41.

<sup>58</sup> Robert P. Carroll, "Coopting the Prophets: Nehemiah and Noadiah," in *Priests, Prophets and Scribes: Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honor of Joseph Blenkinsopp* (ed. Eugene. Ulrich, John. W.Wright, Robert P. Carroll and Philip. R. Davis; Sheffield: JSOT Press. 1992), 97.

<sup>59</sup> Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 41.

<sup>60</sup> Eskenazi, "Out from the Shadows," 42.

<sup>61</sup> Eskenazi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," 122.

to glimpse something of the elevated status of women during the Second Temple period.

As we conclude, we need to ask the following important question: What are the implications of the conditions of women in Yehud for African women's theology? I suggest two of them here below:

## **1 Redefining the Theology of Family/Household within African Contexts**

From the views of the preceding scholars (cf. in particular, Meyers and Bird (settlement period) and Camp and Eskenazi (post-exilic period), women's alleged elevated status was usually proportional to the place accorded a household which is a traditionally male sphere. Legitimated authority in all spheres belonged to men irrespective of a particular period in Israelite history. The significance of the preceding views about the relatively elevated status of women though, lies in the often unacknowledged foregrounding of women's significant roles particularly during certain eras in Israelite history. Such a foregrounding reveals the importance of work done in the private sphere of a complex household by women. It also cautions against the idolisation of the (male) public sphere highlighting the fact that important work done by all people, irrespective of their gender, whether during the monarchic period or the post-exilic period, needs to be valued and rewarded accordingly. In my view, there is therefore no need to absolutise work done in any of the spheres at the expense of the other. Having noted the preceding though, the observation that in both the settlement and the post-exilic periods, women's alleged elevated status was linked with the elevation of the status of the family household status and with a woman's traditional role as household manager, need to be revisited by gender-sensitive (African) biblical scholars. As they do that, they may hopefully emerge with a liberating theology/biblical hermeneutic of an African family. In the renewed post-colonial, post-independence African context, where gender roles have been constructed and valued according to people's participation in the valued public male and the devalued private female spheres, a woman's role as a household manager needs to be problematised. Its redefinition needs to be accompanied by affirming definitions of womanhood and manhood/masculinities. The latter, is particularly important when we consider the problematic situation in which Judean men projected their stress on Woman Stranger. Such definitions might enable us to approach issues which affect both women and men more objectively, for example, in our scathing attack against prostitution in Africa, focus would also need to be on the clients who keep the trade alive. Scholars might also need to consider a new definition of family in our varied African contexts - gay, single parented families, child-headed and polygynous families among others.

## **2 Women as Members of the Qahal**

That the Christian Bible has been used and continues to be used to exclude women from participation in ministry is something which justice seeking scholars, continue to wrestle with to this day. As has happened within various contextual theologies, including African, Black and liberation theologies, the recovery of female roles and their equal participation not only as members of the *qahal* but also as servants of God (cf. the prophetess Noadiah) could empower those of us with a "canon consciousness" to affirm the full humanity of women and their gifting as children and servants of God in whose image, male and female were created. The words of Meyers come to mind here: "It is worth contemplating that the unity and asexuality of the Israelite deity bore some relationship to the human community made in the image of that God."<sup>62</sup>

## F CONCLUSION

*Lentšu la kgoši le agelwa lešaka*, the word of a *kgoši* (traditional leader) has to be encircled by a kraal. The question is, if the word of one who is supposed to protect the weak dis-empowers them, should the word still be protected? We dare not as we deliberately choose not to let a limping animal go uphill. The alleged elevation of women's status in both periods was linked with the family resurgence as the locus of power and the role of woman as household manager. The Woman of Worth who is the household manager par excellence still had her *ba'al*, who was known at the city gates. In the 21st century (South) African context in which more and more women join the public sphere, where more and more men become retrenched while in the interest of affirmative action, more and more women get appointed to higher positions than men, could the role of woman as household manager be found to be affirming? In our effort to be shaped by liberating masculinities, could the empowerment of men as household managers not be found affirming by all in the family? In contexts where *kyriarchy* remains entrenched, we need to be careful not to quickly propagate the existence of egalitarianism between women and men as seems to be the case with the scholars whose works were engaged in the present essay. It is pertinent that as justice-seeking biblical scholars and theologians, we continue to honestly challenge all life-denying forces in our unequal contexts as we intentionally refuse to let a limping cow climb a mountain.

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<sup>62</sup> Meyers, "Everyday Life," 250.

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Prof. Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa. *Email*: masenmj@unisa.ac.za.