

## Reading the Virtuous Woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 as a Reflection of the Attributes of the Traditional M̄ship<sup>1</sup> Woman of Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT:

*The book of Proverbs falls within wisdom literature with 31:10-31 as part of its epilogue. The Hebrew poet here has both theological and literary purpose – to instruct the covenant community in godliness through realistic reflection on society. As such, the characteristic attributes of the godly and industrious female figure portrayed in this acrostic poem may well be taken as an existing reality rather than a mere literary poetic imagination. Therefore, functioning as an epitome of womanhood for all generations, this acrostic poem finds close affinity with the characteristic attributes of the cultured traditional as well as the godly M̄ship woman of Nigeria. This article basically endeavours to show the resemblances between the qualities of the human woman of Prov 31:10-31 and the M̄ship woman within the Nigerian context.*

### A INTRODUCTION<sup>2</sup>

Among other themes, the book of Proverbs<sup>3</sup> deals with the figure of womanhood. It presents a vivid description of the woman of virtue (Prov 31:10-31) in

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<sup>1</sup> The writer of this article is an original M̄ship speaker who is quite familiar with the culture and custom of his people. Therefore, he writes from personal observable experience. The M̄ship people are found in the southern part of Pankshin Local Government Council of Plateau State, Nigeria. According to the 1991/92 census they number approximately 17,000, but the diaspora speakers are not included. It is stated that, "The word 'M̄ship' refers both to the kingdom and the language. M̄ship belongs to the West-Chadic sub-group of the Afro-Asiatic phylum, a language spoken in Plateau State, Nigeria. The Afro-Asiatic constitute[s] a language family with about 375 living languages and more than 350 million speakers spread throughout North Africa, Southwest Asia, part of the Sahel, West Africa and East Africa." See Mohammed M. Aminu and Katwal P. Isah, "The M̄ship: People, Language, and Dialects," *CLN* 25/2 (2010): 1-16. Their culture shares close affinity with that of the Ngas, Mupun and Mwaghavul peoples of Plateau State. Two dialects are identified in M̄ship language: *Longmaar* and *Jibaam*. The speakers live in separate locations within M̄ship land, headed by one traditional chief, the *long* M̄ship.

<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge with deepest gratitude the useful suggestions of Prof. Hendrik L. Bosman of Stellenbosch University, South Africa and Dr. Matthew Michael (Rabbi Mikhail) of ECWA Theological Seminary, Kagoro, Nigeria.

contrast to the woman of questionable morality, a "dame folly" (Prov 2:16-19; 5:1-23; 6:24-29; 7:1-27) in human society. It gives the reader a clear picture of the characteristics of the woman of virtue who is a wife and mother; and by her noble character, a friend to her neighbourhood and to society. This acrostic poem about the woman of worth, a capable wife, is located primarily in the context of an early Jewish household.<sup>4</sup> Wisdom personified here as the female figure comparatively projects this virtuous woman as a role model and an epitome of womanhood and motherhood for all women, wives, and mothers of all generations in every culture. Her household also benefits from her virtuousness. On account of her virtue and industry in the home-front, her husband not only praises her but he himself earns respect and receives praise as well from society. Also, her children praise her for being a good mother.

Given the context of an early Jewish family, the question is whether the personification of wisdom as a virtuous female figure in this text is a reflection of an existing reality of such women in Israelite society or only a resemblance? What does the Hebrew poet here set out to achieve by this description by reflecting the family environment of an early Jewish society? How can the described attributes of this industrious female figure be related to the domestic role of womanhood and motherhood in the context of contemporary African household and society, specifically of the Miship women, in view of the paradigm shift in cultural norms that followed upon the ideological influence of humanism, feminism, and modernism? To achieve our purpose, this study is approached from literary, hermeneutical and theological perspectives. It therefore proceeds sequentially by considering the goal of the Hebrew poet in this

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<sup>3</sup> Arnold and Beyer state that generally, "a proverb is a succinct and persuasive saying proven true by experience." They explain that the topics addressed in the Book of Proverbs cover everything in God's universe and how it operates. With the collection of these various "wise sayings" over time, the "result is a collection of timeless truths or basic values proven by previous generations." As its basic theological import, "The unifying purpose of the collection is to encourage the reader to live righteously and justly before God." See Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 314. Scott understands a proverb as that which, "sums up in compact and easily remembered form an observation or judgment which is widely held to be true." See Robert B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (2nd ed.; AB 18; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982), 3. Or as put by LeLand Ryken, a proverb or aphorism "is a concise, memorable statement of truth" which is a dominant literary form in the Bible. He also posits that, "The Bible as a whole is the most aphoristic book in the world." See LeLand Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature and Get More Out of It* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1984), 121.

<sup>4</sup> According to Leo G. Perdue, "household has a long and storied history as an Israelite and Jewish institution ... [because it is] the central social institution in Israel" that functioned based on patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal family system. Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs* (IBC; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 2000), 275.

text, understanding the identity of wisdom personified by the virtuous female figure, and how these described female attributes connect with the traditional understanding of Miship perspective of womanhood, wifeness and motherhood in view of contemporary paradigm shifts in cultural norms.

## B THE GOAL OF HEBREW POETS

Hebrew poets had specific goal(s) for writing the wisdom literature – at least theological and literary purposes are quite noticeable. The book of Proverbs, as an aspect of this literary domain, has religious poetry as part of its genre. Robert Scott states that the book of Proverbs is, "a source book of instructional materials for use in a school or in private study, for the cultivation of personal morality and practical wisdom."<sup>5</sup> Wisdom in the OT is gleaned largely from society. As such, it is considered to be the voice of reflection and experience<sup>6</sup> functioning as prescribed instructional curriculum for society. As Ryken explains, proverb as a literary form, "is a form of verbal art, and its content comes from close observation of life."<sup>7</sup> This suggests the timeless effects of the wisdom on human society as found in the book of Proverbs. As an instructional manual, the book of Proverbs itself is described as a "practical handbook of prudent living" that leaves "no question as to the high ethical teaching" that aims at relating "individual virtue to the will of God."<sup>8</sup> Washington rightly points out that Proverbs' intent, "is to transmit insights whereby one might learn to cope with life" (1:2-6). As such, it "invites the reader to intellectual discipline as a life giving synthesis of keen observation and reflection, ethical concern, and piety."<sup>9</sup> Charles Martin summarises it thus, "Proverbs is about life and living it the sensible way."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Derek Kidner, "Poetry and Wisdom Literature: Introduction," in *The Lion Handbook to the Bible* (2d ed.; ed., David Alexander and Pat Alexander; Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1992), 317.

<sup>7</sup> Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 128. It is advised in this regard that although "In seeking to interpret the various proverbs and apply them to life, one must bear in mind that they are generalizations. Though stated as absolutes – as their literary form requires – they are meant to be applied in specific situations and not indiscriminately." See William S. Lasor, David A. Hubbard, and Frederic W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 468.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979), 1020.

<sup>9</sup> Harold C. Washington, "Proverbs," in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (3d ed.; Michael D. Coogan et al., ed., Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2001), 904-5.

<sup>10</sup> Charles G. Martin, "Proverbs," in *The International Bible Commentary* (2d ed.; ed. Frederick F. Bruce; London: Marshall Morgan and Scott Publications Ltd., 1986), 656.

Hebrew poets usually project Israel as a covenant community. As such, the wisdom authors in the book of Proverbs aim at applying the belief of Israel's covenant faith as primordial to daily attitudes, activities, and relationships in her society.<sup>11</sup> Longman and Dillard note that as this book is intentionally explored, its reader soon discovers the deep theological import of the book; for while "[i]t is a book of practical advice, [but] it is advice given in the context of the 'fear of the Lord.'"<sup>12</sup> Proverbs, it is maintained, sets out not only to present wisdom needed for successful living. Far more, it provides instruction for living in relationship with God and his created world as well.<sup>13</sup> On this ground, it is said that, "The prime mission of Proverbs is to spell out strikingly, memorably, and concisely just what it means to be fully at God's disposal"<sup>14</sup> – to "fear the Lord." In essence, "[t]he Israelites were to keep the Law and to hear and obey the Prophets, but the people were also to apply the truths of the Law and the Prophets to every aspect of living."<sup>15</sup> This way, the theological goal is attained.

A didactic import is also part of the goal of Hebrew poetry. The Book of Proverbs aims at instructing the young and guiding them into a happy and prosperous life by avoiding the pitfalls of folly. Even adults are not excluded. According to Scott, the poet is said to be teaching a course in applied religion. He maintains, "it was essential to establish contact with the traditional mores of the community and the proverbial lore of the common life." Therefore, Scott assumes that the poet was "seeking to inculcate . . . positive religious morality" by a "pedagogical technique to include sayings of a type with which his pupils would be familiar, in order to maintain their interest."<sup>16</sup> Should this find validity, it could also connect with the viewpoint of Andrew Hill and John Walton who observe, "Since knowledge and understanding are heirlooms more precious than jewels, gold, and silver, it is imperative for young people to listen,

<sup>11</sup> Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 460. As a covenant people, Israel is also a religious community. Regarding the religious and ethical teaching of the book of Proverbs, Scott notes, "The intellectual element in Hebrew Wisdom usually is secondary to the religious and ethical element. . . . To those who receive it, this wisdom becomes a moral guide and mentor." See Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (2d ed.; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 265.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold and Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, 322.

<sup>14</sup> Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 460.

<sup>15</sup> Sid S. Buzzell, "Proverbs," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck; Wheaton, Ill.: SP Publications, 1987), 901.

<sup>16</sup> Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 22.

receive, and obey the teachings of the elders, the sages, and especially their parents"<sup>17</sup> (Prov 1:8-9).

This Hebrew poet also has a literary goal in focus. The literary characteristics of most Hebrew proverbs are that they are short, compact statements that express truths about human behaviour<sup>18</sup> (Prov 10:1-22:16), describing the consequences of particular human actions or character dispositions (Prov 10:1; 20:13; 14:5). Hence, the use of figurative language, couched in similetic and metaphoric imageries, feature commonly in Hebrew proverbs (Prov 25:25). Simile and metaphor are said to be the most pervasive elements of biblical poetry.<sup>19</sup> Similes make the proverbs more vivid and powerful, used sometimes in a humorous or sarcastic way (see Prov 11:22; cf. 26:9; 26:14; 13:14; and 15:4). Characteristic of Hebrew wisdom literature is that the sages, in association with the priests and prophets,<sup>20</sup> formed an important force in Israelite society.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 359.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Harrison says, "Proverbs consists largely of short, incisive statements that could be employed with the greatest effect in the communication of behavio[u]ral, moral, and spiritual truths." He notes also that the overall function of these developed proverbs is with the "aim of inculcating certain behavio[u]ral principles by means of associating and contrasting certain facets of everyday experience." In this connection, they almost always express contrast (Prov 10-15; and those that use "better...than" patterns (28:6; 15:16-17; 16:19, 32; 17:1, 2), make simple observations about human behaviour (Prov 17:8; cf. 14:20), and evaluate such conducts as they interact with society (Prov 15:27). See Harrison, *Introduction*, 1011.

<sup>19</sup> By definition, Ryken says, "A simile draws a correspondence between two things" while metaphor, by its definition and understanding, "adopts a bolder strategy. It omits the 'like' or "'as' and asserts that A is B. . . . Both metaphor and simile operate on the premise of similarity between two things" (Prov 13:14; 15:4; and 16:24). See Ryken, *Bible as Literature*, 91.

<sup>20</sup> The book of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are described as "wisdom materials" for their wisdom elements. Proverbs, in particular, is an aspect of wisdom literature that is instructional and didactic in nature, mostly seen as optimistic about life. Such didactic works are linked to Jewish sages who were concerned about practical and philosophical matters of life. They were seen as both pessimists and optimists because, "they wrestled with difficult philosophical and theological questions such as the problem of evil and the prosperity of the wicked." See Kenneth L. Barker et al., ed., *The NIV Study Bible, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 721. The primary functions of the Hebrew sages were to advise the kings and instruct the young in society. Within the domain of instructing the young in the society, "this carefully polished anonymous poem" (Prov 31: 10-31) served the important function in Israelite society, "to affirm the sense of wholeness embodied in this picture of the perfect wife and mother. This portrait of an industrious, competent, conscientious, pious woman is a conclusion well suited to a book

It appears surprising that the verses of this poem (Prov 31:10-31) would focus on a wife of noble character when Proverbs primarily, though not exclusively, addresses young men on the threshold of matured life. Nevertheless, it stands to offer counsel and guidance on the kind of wife a young man ought to seek. Therefore, it is a persuasion to seek and marry Lady Wisdom (see also 9:1-2) instead of "dame folly." Clearly, these verses focus, as Arnold and Beyer draw attention to, "on the importance of finding a good wife," for it has "warned against sexual impurity all along the way,"<sup>21</sup> especially of the whoring and seductive trap of the adulterous woman (see also Prov 5:1-14; 6:20-35). This understanding leads Washington to conclude that the original audience was "primarily young men preparing for adult responsibilities."<sup>22</sup> In this vein, this poem is paired<sup>23</sup> with the first opening nine chapters. It stresses the effects of wisdom and the role of the woman of valour, prevailing on the wife-seeker to be on the lookout for a godly woman for a wife. This presupposes that a bad wife is detrimental to the husband, but a good, godly and wise wife is a treasure (Prov 18:22; 19:13) as her presence in the household adds value to the family's well-being and prestige. With this given, Arnold and Beyer submit, "The young man, beginning his life of service to God, can be ruined or made successful by his decision of a life partner." They argue that since his success depends on the character of a good and godly wife, this poem emphasises "the role of the virtuous wife and mother as the one most able to build up a character of wisdom in her family."<sup>24</sup>

### C THE IDENTITY OF THE VIRTUOUS FEMALE FIGURE

Proverbs 31:10-31 opens with a description of a woman or wife whose worth is far beyond "rubies" or jewels (v. 10). It is part of the concluding epilogue of

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which teaches the nature and importance of a life lived in obedience to God in every detail." See Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 469.

<sup>21</sup> Arnold and Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, 320.

<sup>22</sup> Washington, "Proverbs," 904.

<sup>23</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 246.

<sup>24</sup> Arnold and Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, 321. These scholars read Prov 31 from a patriarchal perspective. While the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, as wisdom literature, reflect on what wisdom means and how it can be used to instruct primarily young men, it is not exclusively so. When this text is read as a form of marriage counselling for young Jewish men alone, it misses the whole point of OT wisdom literature. Scott also comments that the acrostic poem of Prov 31:10-31, "develops the thought of xviii 22, and it is interesting, not only for the light it throws on domestic activities of the time, but because of the degree of managerial responsibility evidently assumed by the wife of a well-to-do man in ancient Israel." See Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 186. If, "To be better is to be forewarned" is a realistic maxim, serving as a guiding principle for life, then nothing else replaces acquisition of godly wisdom, particularly a godly wife that young men are being guided to seek in this poem.

the whole book. It is an impressive acrostic poem honouring a wife of noble character. She demonstrates and thus epitomises many of the qualities and values identified with wisdom throughout the book. The Hebrew word that describes the character of this woman or wife, variously translated as "excellent" (ESV), "noble character" (NIV), "capable" (NJB, NRS), and "virtuous" (NKJ, NLT), or "substance"<sup>25</sup> is חַיִל, meaning, power, strength, wealth and an army. The basic meaning of this noun is "strength," but it is used here in its non-military sense as an attribute of the woman or wife. When used of a woman, its preferred translation is "virtuous" to depict the female's tender character. Since חַיִל stands in construct relationship with אִשָּׁה, meaning woman, wife, and female, 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. Tom Hawkins affirms this position when he posits that, "physical strength and strength of character are both evident in the poem and should not be omitted from an understanding of the אִשָּׁת־חַיִל."<sup>26</sup> Perdue further agrees when he adds that the characteristic attribute of, "moral worth . . . seems to fit best what the poet has in mind in describing this married woman."<sup>27</sup>

The reader of this epilogue in Prov 31:10-31 is never left in doubt that the "acrostic is clearly about a woman of position and ability in her own right. She has a large household, ample means, land and vineyard, knowledge and charm. She is diligent, wise, and caring."<sup>28</sup> The household roles pictured here about the woman of moral worth and industry suggests that she "is probably the senior female married to the head of the household . . . [whose] chief role was that of manager of the household."<sup>29</sup> This Jewish housewife and mother possesses the virtues of care, hard labour, wisdom, managerial skills, *etcetera* and above all, the "fear of Yahweh," the latter being the foundation for her godliness and moral worthiness. Although the content of the acrostic poem indicates that she is of high status, yet she pursues life from the perspective of humility, godly wisdom, righteousness, and good human relationship.<sup>30</sup> Even though

<sup>25</sup> Christine R. Yoder, "The Woman of Substance אִשָּׁת־חַיִל: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31," *JBL* 122/3 (2003): 427-447.

<sup>26</sup> Tom R. Hawkins, "The Wife of Noble Character in Proverbs 31:10-31," *BSac* 153 (1996): 14.

<sup>27</sup> Perdue, *Proverbs*, 277.

<sup>28</sup> Martin, "Proverbs," 689.

<sup>29</sup> Perdue, *Proverbs*, 277.

<sup>30</sup> As Waltke asserts in his conclusion, "Righteousness should be subsumed under the umbrella concept of doing what is right in a social relationship as defined by God's standard of what is right behavior[u]r." Such is what brought this woman of virtue and wife of worth to public recognition. It is godly righteousness that deprives "self to benefit others" expressed in right human relations that makes a woman known. See Bruce K. Waltke, "Righteousness in Proverbs," *WTJ* 70 (2008): 235. The electric modern struggle for gender equality in social and public life, politics, economy, employment, and the like, apart from godly wisdom, moral character, and per-

Madipoane Masenya suspects that the male figure poet/redactor held her in high esteem because she might have been from the upper class in society,<sup>31</sup> we rather think that Hawkins is right when he contends that,

While the woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 is depicted as having a certain degree of financial security, every attribute of character mentioned in the poem can be true of those without the wealth she seemingly enjoys. Character traits such as trustworthiness (v. 11), industriousness (vv. 11, 13, 15, 17-20, 24, 27), wise speech (v. 26a), and faithful instruction (v. 26b) all rise out of her "fear of Yahweh" (v. 30) and are not related to economic means. In fact neither the possession of great wealth nor the lack of it excludes one from emulating the qualities of this outstanding woman.<sup>32</sup>

This woman "exemplifies strength, independence, courage, kindness, wisdom, and piety."<sup>33</sup> 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 dissension (see also 15:17; 17:1). The book concludes with what Tremper Longman and Raymond Dillard call "a powerful acrostic poem" on the virtuous woman as the poem indicates that, "This woman reflects her association with Lady Wisdom in Prov 8. [As such,] she is capable both in the home and outside."<sup>34</sup> Her relatedness with godly wisdom makes her stand out among other women in the society of her day. Bruce Waltke notes that, "Wisdom in Proverbs and its correlative term "righteousness" is all about being rightly related to God, to other human beings, to all creatures, and to the environment."<sup>35</sup> Such expression no less fits the lifestyle of this woman and wife in Prov 31:10-31. It is quite clear that it is her godly wisdom that serves as the

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sonal integrity, may achieve only a little for women or it may even only amount to an ideological struggle. Laurenti Magesa, in discussing the concept of *woman defined theology* as an arm of liberation theology, cautioned, "Any effort by feminism to marginalize men is reverse discrimination, and it does nothing but undercut the whole liberation objective." This author notes that the quest for woman defined theology, if not primarily to achieve universal recognition and respect for human dignity, and if not handled with clarity of purpose, could "become merely an ideology." See Laurenti Magesa, "The Challenge of African Woman Defined Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa: Theological Reflections for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (ed. Nahashon W. Ndungu and Philomena N. Mwaura (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 88-101.

<sup>31</sup> Madipoane J. Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele), *How Worthy is the Woman of Worth? A Feminist Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31*, n. p. [cited 7 June 2013]. Online: <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/5380>.

<sup>32</sup> Hawkins, "Wife of Noble Character," 15.

<sup>33</sup> Washington, "Proverbs," 942.

<sup>34</sup> Longman III and Dillard, *Introduction*, 273.

<sup>35</sup> Waltke, "Righteousness," 225.



bedrock of her relationship to God (v. 30), her husband (vv. 10-12) and children (v. 28), members of her household (v. 27), and other members of society (v. 20).

But as we queried earlier, is the personification of wisdom as virtuous female figure in this text – such precious and almost priceless woman and wife of worth – given the context of an early Jewish family, a reflection of an existing reality in such a society or only a resemblance? Some scholars have reasoned that since the entire book of Proverbs holds “wise sayings” with didactic or instructional import, this virtuous woman may not, in actual sense, be real but only imaginary. For instance, Paul Koptak admits 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, similar to the personifications of Wisdom throughout the book.” In defence of this thesis, Koptak asserts, “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.”<sup>36</sup> However, she is also considered as a “composite figure of Persian-period women, particularly women of influence or position.”<sup>37</sup> Perceived in this manner, the literary device of personification functions more like an extended metaphor capturing the imagery of an ideal morally upright and godly woman, who stands as a standard of one qualified to be a respected wife and mother. Through her sterling characteristics, then, society flourishes for the common good.

While this understanding is valid on its merit, we should be open to consider the possibility of the existence of few real women in ancient Israel who exhibited such moral virtues that attracted the attention of society, the poets and the sages. Hebrew poets and sages never wrote or spoke from a vacuum. As the content and purpose of the book of Proverbs indicate, this Hebrew guild were interacting with and integrating reality into real life situations. They transferred concrete real life experiences into literary form for instructions. This naturally connects with the question, “who can find” a wife/woman of such sterling qualities? Such a question should be considered as suggesting that society should admire women of such character because they are rare, rather than that they are nonexistent.<sup>38</sup> Although the rarity of *אִשָּׁה* used for women in the OT in contrast to men appears only in Prov 12:4; 31:10-31 and implied in Ruth 3:11, as Yoder contends “that these women are uncommon,” yet, it does not suggest their absence in society. This, Yoder concedes in her conclusion.<sup>39</sup>

Being a religious society that was regulated by the principle of covenantal relationship to Yahweh, the Israelites must have produced women of

<sup>36</sup> Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 675.

<sup>37</sup> Yoder, “Woman of Substance,” 429.

<sup>38</sup> Buzzell, “Proverbs,” 972.

<sup>39</sup> Yoder, “The Woman of Substance,” 432.

godly character and virtues cherished by community. As in this case, the secret of the extolled character qualities of the virtuous woman and the wife of worth, of her influence on family and society, and of her industry, lies in the "fear of the Lord" in which all true wisdom has its roots.<sup>40</sup> As argued above, Murphy is right when he maintains that finding a virtuous wife is more than a casual finding because finding a good wife, a godly wife, is not possible by mere human effort except with God's support (see also Prov 18: 22). On this basis, he concludes that the existence of such a virtuous woman was a reality in Israelite society. He asserts, "...the present poem describes a wife who is married, and so was 'found,' and is deservedly the object of her husband's praise."<sup>41</sup> As well articulated by Habtu, "...the responsibilities that this woman discharges are indicative of the important role of the woman in ancient Israelite society."<sup>42</sup> If such women were rare in other societies, certainly, they existed in Israelite society on the basis of their covenantal standing.

The manner in which this female figure is portrayed as receiving praise as reward from both her household and society for her disposition can be more than merely a literary creative imagination. Israelite women, just as African women, lived in a society with a defined cultural world-view. Masenya re-echoes Kraft's view on cultural world-views by stating that a world-view of a culture organises that culture by shaping and regulating life and existence. She rightly points out that within the context of an optimistic simplistic cultural world-view, an order exists, to which people must adhere. "Those who fail to submit to its demands would be punished while those who adhere to it would be rewarded."<sup>43</sup> This is the case here in Prov 31:10-31. Her husband and chil-

<sup>40</sup> David Alexander and Pat Alexander, eds., *The Lion Handbook to the Bible* (2d ed.; Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1992), 361.

<sup>41</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 247.

<sup>42</sup> Tewoldemedhin Habtu, "Proverbs," in *The Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo; Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive and Zondervan, 2006), 786.

<sup>43</sup> Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele), "Wisdom and Wisdom Converge: Selected Old Testament and Northern Sotho Proverbs," in *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* (ed. Mary N. Getui, Knut Holter and Victor Zinkuratire; Nairobi, Kenya: Action Publishers, 2001), 134. However, Masenya implies from her analysis that, "a Hebrew view of a good wife was that of the one who acted in silence and subordination: the one who would not challenge her husband's views because doing that would probably have qualified her as being contentious and thus being bad. It is a pity that the picture of women given in the Book of Proverbs is from a male point of view." Additionally, she argues that, "if women had had an opportunity to share in the writing of the book, we would probably have had a different picture of a woman. For example, what men describe as contentiousness might be viewed differently by women." Masenya, "Wisdom and Wisdom Converge," 141. We think this respected female scholar is spilling emotions here in her exaggeration. Proverbs, being a didactic literary piece among other imports, contrasts what is normative with what is a misnomer in a structured and well organised society. Though male dominated as the

dren acknowledged the sterling qualities of wifehood and motherhood she had exhibited in the family (vv. 11-12, 28-30).<sup>44</sup>

The content of vv. 11-12 lays the background for her husband's praise of her. The combination of the words בָּטַח (to trust) and יִחָסֵר (*qal* impf. 3ms of חָסַר<sup>45</sup> "not to lack," with the לֹא negation), seems to suggest that her character of godliness, moral worth and wisdom made her husband a proud and fulfilled man. Understood within the context of virtue and worthiness, her בַּעַל (husband, owner), suffers no emotional or psychological trauma because of her bad nagging behaviour. Rather, he is at peace at home because of the presence of a godly, wise, matured, skilled, self-sacrificing and by implication, a submissive and respectful wife whom he both respects and cherishes. He reposes full confidence in her because, in contradistinction to the godless, nagging, quarrelsome and morally bankrupt wife (Prov 19:13; 21:9, 19); she brings him good, not harm (see also Prov 18:22; 19:14). In her relationship to him, captured in the word נָמַל, "to deal out," she does him no evil or harm (רָע, to be bad, evil, with the לֹא negation, v. 12). This suggests that such a woman of noble character neither does nor means harm to her husband. Rather, she is "an asset, not a liability, to her husband . . . She supports and encourages him. And she is faithful in helping him"<sup>46</sup> as his suitable companion. She believes in her husband, values him, trusts him, makes him achieve self-esteem, and ensures he succeeds in life. In view of her critical role in family relationships, Masenya admits that the Book of Proverbs agitates, "the need for good rather than bad wives. Good wives would obviously contribute to the proper management of the family and also enhance their husband's status."<sup>47</sup> As a consequence, the content of vv. 28-30 reveals how her husband praises her. The verbs עָשָׂה (to do, to make, to press or squeeze), and עָלָה (to go up), both used in the *qal* perf.

Jewish society was, yet, that the woman of Prov 31:10-31 is well recognised at home and in society, and is highly elevated particularly by a male poet, exonerates the male gender from her bias. However, while not sharing all her arguments and conclusions, every child born of a "mother" would readily identify with her valid concern for the realities of the African women in South Africa. See Madipoane Masenya (ngwana Mphahlele), "For Better for Worse?" – the (Christian) Bible and African Women," in *OTE* 22/1 (2009): 126-50. Perhaps one would understand this broadly to mean what she refers to as the "African-South African Women," that is, African women in South Africa. See Masenya, *How Worthy*, <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/5380>.

<sup>44</sup> Being an ideal wife, she is "responsible, capable, hardworking and completely trusted" by members of her family. On the basis of this trust, "Not only do[es] her husband, family and household depend on her provision and foresight for their physical needs; they owe her their well-being at a much deeper level." See Alexander and Alexander, *Lion Handbook*, 361.

<sup>45</sup> An expression of simple contentment on the part of the husband is a preferred rendering of the verb חָסַר. See Martin, "Proverbs," 688.

<sup>46</sup> Buzzell, "Proverbs," 972.

<sup>47</sup> Masenya, "Wisdom and Wisdom Converge," 141.

2nd pers. fem. sing., suggest her exceeding excellence in character. The idea of "exceeding" or "surpassing" other בָּנוֹת "daughters" (correctly rendered by NKJ) in v. 29 expresses the verb עָלָה with the preposition עַל, to translate וְאַתָּה עָלִית עַל-כָּל־בְּלָנָה (literally, "but you go up over them all"). Her husband recognises that because of her exceptionally noble character, she stands above many women in the land (v. 29).<sup>48</sup> Obviously, such strong adoration of a well cherished and valued ruby goes beyond mere poetic imaginary ingenuity.

The children also praise her for the godly, righteous, moral, and noble character qualities observable in her life. The Hebrew אָשַׁר has the idea of pronouncement of blessing in this context. The children grow up and call her "blessed," indicating their sense of satisfaction, joy and pride for having such a woman as their mother (v. 28). The verb phrase קָמוּ בְּנֵיהָ is variously translated as "her children rise up" (ESV, NKJ, NRS), "her children arise" (NIV), and "her children stand up" (NJB, NLT). But the presence of the verb קָם (to arise, to stand) is better translated in this context as "her children grow up." When her children grow up, they will not only praise her, but will call her a "happy" and "blessed" mother. The idea of the concept of *blessedness* in this respect suggests that she enjoys happy circumstances and joy radiates from her to others in the family. To capture such a vivid expression by a poet who lived in a real Israelite society no doubt leaves us with the impression of real women and mothers of such sterling qualities, though rare and hard to find.

<sup>48</sup> In his praise of her natural beauty, he admits that the exhibition of her godly and righteous character overturns the deceptive charming facial beauty that attracts masculine admiration of feminine physique (v. 30). The adjectival use of יָרָא, standing in construct relationship to יְהוָה, with the wife as the object of his praise, reveals this admission. His praising her, Buzzell suggests, includes "telling others she is the greatest of the noble women." See Buzzell, "Proverbs," 973. Such praise suggests that true feminine worth is not to be found in a woman's external beauty but in what lies beneath the externals. Character is what makes a person. The possession of godly and moral character is what makes a woman a sought-after in society. That a husband extols the inherent virtues of his wife publicly shows he enjoys her company and contributions to his life. Certainly, a good wife not only gains the favour of a responsible husband but also his trust and dependence, his support and encouragement. This would be unlikely where she lacks wisdom, particularly in her use of words and behaviour towards him. It appears that the virtuous wife in this acrostic poem does not talk back to her husband nor is she impulsive, superimposing, rush, arrogant and selfish. She does not adamantly argue with him, insisting on her viewpoint or does what she decides in her heart, not minding its effects on his feelings. Instead, she reasons with her husband in an atmosphere of willing respect and submission through the power of negotiation. It seems also that this wife of noble character does not insist on her point of view even when her husband asks that she considers other possible options to her decision. Rather, listening to the voice of reason and to the dictates of the Scriptures as a person of faith, she is persuasive so as to gain his support.

The motivating factor for the children's praise lies in her qualities of a good wife and mother that make her a dear friend to the entire household. Martin suggests that her receiving "the respect and praise she deserves" from her family is a "hinting that her training of the household has avoided the tragedies"<sup>49</sup> of unwise and wayward children (see also 22:6; 10:1; 15:20; 29:15). The construction *צוֹפֵיָה הַלִּיכוֹת בַּיְתָהּ*, variously translated as "She looks well to the ways of her household" (ESV, NRS), "She watches over the affairs of her household" (NIV, NKJ), "She keeps good watch on the conduct of her household" (NJB), and "She carefully watches everything in her household" (NLT), reveals the idea of her careful oversight, instructions and good training. The word *צָפָה*, used in its *qal* absolute form, expresses the idea of "watching," indicating the quality of her diligent care over the affairs of her household. We could also deduce that it expresses her orderliness, fairness, and her managing the household without favouritism or discrimination. That the children praise and pronounce blessings on their mother in the use of *אֲשֶׁר*, presupposes she is not a rival with her daughters or housemaids. It equally presupposes that having a good understanding of her household, she does not discriminate among her children, housemaids, nor does she take sides; she cares instead for all of them, availing herself to listen to and give godly counsel to guide them through life.

#### **D THE MISHIP WOMAN IN THE LIGHT OF THE VIRTUES OF PROVERBS 31:10-31**

The Miship woman, both traditional and modern, just as her female counterparts elsewhere, is a full human person with life, blood, feelings, emotions, self-worth, intelligence and competence. The Miship male counterpart and those in both patriarchal and patrilocal societies must admit this reality. That the "need for the creation of woman is adumbrated by God" strongly suggests "the importance of [her] companionship for man"<sup>50</sup> and her critical role in society.<sup>51</sup> There are points of connection with the resemblances as well as lessons

<sup>49</sup> Martin, "Proverbs," 689.

<sup>50</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; 2nd ed.; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1991), 68.

<sup>51</sup> Just imagine how dull, unattractive, and unromantic society would have been without the sweet orchestration and fragrance of the female presence. The importance of women's role in society is crucial to life even in a male dominated culture such as Africa. Therefore, the dignity of womanhood must be recognised and deeply appreciated by all in society, even by the women folk themselves. We cannot deny the fact that women have a critical role in society. For instance, Otite and Ogionwo assert, "Every politician, policy maker, President and Bishop, Parliamentarian, Speaker, or Senate President, etc. is a child of a mother." See Onigu Otite and William Ogionwo, *An Introduction to Sociological Studies* (2nd ed.; Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books, 2006), 304. Women offer to society tenderness, care and love, compassion, mediation to bring peace during conflicts (whether family, clan, tribe, national, even global), comfort, and act the role of healing balm where there are hurts and pains

that the modern Miship woman, particularly the godly one, is to learn from the virtuous female figure in Prov 31:10-31. The key ethical and theological elements that brought this woman to public recognition reside in her godly wisdom and the fear of God. Biblical wisdom provides guidance for the religious, social, economic, and the moral life. It achieves for an individual "knowledge [that] pertains to pursuing right relatedness."<sup>52</sup> In this connection, the modern Miship woman, wife, and mother, should draw from the fountain of experience and lifestyle of this biblical model and epitome of womanhood, wifehood, motherhood, and caring neighbour, to strive to achieve for herself the correct relatedness in her family and public relations. This is crucial for her sociological and theological influence in society, as such a lifestyle "transforms the City of Man into the City of God."<sup>53</sup>

The glowing attributes of the female figure in Prov 31:10-31 that earned her public recognition "at the gate" (Prov 31:23, 31) no doubt would also include her respect for humanity. The Miship concept of *lokot* (respect, obedience) and *shinyon* (to accord respect) is synonymous with the virtues exhibited by this woman. Broadly, the culture of respect is no doubt seen to be synonymous with Africans. As Babs Fafunwa rightly states, "Closely related to character-training is the respect for elders or those who are in authority."<sup>54</sup> In this

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in society. Irene N. Isiguzo agrees completely when she says, "Women are history-makers, bridge builders and world changers." While she acknowledges the enormous difficulties and sometimes painful burden placed on womanhood, yet she thinks womanhood could be a grand celebration because it is laced with incredible joys and blessings to humanity, whether this is recognised and acknowledged or not. See Irene N. Isiguzo, *Womanhood: The Hidden Treasures* (Lagos, Nigeria: International Mobilization & Media Office, 2009), 126. Women are perceived this way because they are, "builders of life and have the great capacity to love and give themselves selflessly without counting the cost." See Philomena N. Mwaura, "Women and Evangelization: A Challenge to the Church in the Third Millennium," in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa: Theological Reflections for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (ed. Nahashon W. Ndungu and Philomena N. Mwaura; Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 119-144. The Miship woman is endowed with the virtues of physical beauty and strength, moral character of love and care, respect, submission, and industry. She is elegant and energetic. Her well-platted dark hair deifies her natural beauty. Godly and well-cultured Miship womanhood understands in the words of the acrostic poem that, "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised" (Prov 31:30, ESV; see also 1 Pet 3:3-4). As such, the godly and morally upright Miship woman agrees that, "In a woman who professes to be a believer such pursuit of the cult of beauty and personal adornment is doubly unbecoming." See William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews* (NTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2004), 108.

<sup>52</sup> Waltke, "Righteousness," 226.

<sup>53</sup> Waltke, "Righteousness," 226.

<sup>54</sup> Aliu B. Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (2nd ed.; Ibadan, Nigeria: NPS Educational Publishers Ltd., 2004), 13-14.

connection, the traditional Miship woman was trained to be respectful of people of all ages, gender, race and colour, status, creed, and religious persuasions. For example, as also found in the Ngas and Mwaghavul societies,<sup>55</sup> a wife in both traditional and modern Miship society is required to accord due respect to her husband's family. For this reason, she addresses her mother-in-law as *nna* (mother) and her father-in-law as *ndah* (father) just as she does her blood parents. The former would also address her as their *nak* (daughter-in-law). Arrogance and the attitude of disrespect of opinion, persons and societal norms are therefore neither part of her nor is it in the character, spirit, and being of properly cultured Miship womanhood. While she understands that "In every way the woman shares in the same features of personhood as does the man,"<sup>56</sup> she does not use this generic anthropological principle of "sameness" to usurp her husband's positional authority, claiming equality of the same, or demean his personality in any way, even if she is considered as the bread-winner for the family.<sup>57</sup>

For the well-cultured and particularly godly Miship woman, she recognises that, "Her full spiritual equality with men as a sharer in all the blessings of salvation . . . does not imply any basic change in her nature as a *woman* or in the corresponding task which she as a *woman* is called upon to perform. Let a woman remain a woman!"<sup>58</sup> No matter what her elevated social, economic and

<sup>55</sup> For a very brief survey on the historical background of the Miship, Mwaghavul and Ngas societies of Plateau State, Nigeria, see CAPRO Research Department, *A Harvest of Peace: A Survey on the Peoples of Plateau State* (Jos, Nigeria: CAPRO Media Services, 2004), 210-278. Also, for information about the historical root and cultural relatedness of the Miship, Mwaghavul and Ngas tribes, see C. G. Ames, *The Highland Chieftaincies* (vol. 4 of *Gazetteers of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria*; London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1972), 131-147.

<sup>56</sup> Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (NAC 1A; U.S.A.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 213.

<sup>57</sup> Men were considered the "bread-winners" for the family in traditional Miship setting when women had not yet had direct source of the means of livelihood. Civilisation has almost changed this norm now that women are getting Western education and taking up well-paid jobs, which is good for the growth and development of society. Sadly however, in some homes where the wife is found to be the sole "bread-winner" for the family or is earning more income than the husband, some of the family heads tend to abdicate their paternal responsibilities. Also, where the wife earns more income, the possibility exists for her to feel she should be the "boss" in view of her much learning and earning. This scenario sometimes causes family conflict.

<sup>58</sup> Hendriksen and Kistemaker, *Exposition*, 109. Mwaura observes the dilemma of contemporary life affecting the African woman: "Today the profound social, cultural, political, economic and religious changes we are experiencing have shaken the very foundations of the family. Materialism has gained hold of society and engendered a development of false values and disregard for human dignity." See Mwaura, "Women and Evangelization," 132. Ordinarily, the godly and cultured Miship woman, who trails the path of godly wisdom, godliness, righteousness, moral rightness, and ser-

academic status may be, the godly and cultured Miship woman is expected to still maintain her Mishipness of due respect for her humane husband as her leader. His failure to live up to his responsibilities of headship, though a misnomer of a cultured Miship man, does not erode that inherent side of respect in her for him and his family. This attitude naturally should attract her husband's, even his family's complements in return for her respect, "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all . . . Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates" (Prov 31:29, 31, ESV). She gains his love and that of his family because, "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (Prov 31:26, ESV) whenever she speaks to him. It is considered disrespectful for a traditional and well-mannered Miship wife to be sarcastic or careless in her choice and use of words, even when she is angered, because the norm of her cultured Mishipness teaches her to apply patience and wisdom in action and speech. However, not all Miship wives fully adhered to this norm even in its traditional cultural setting. It appears the situation is worsening with the influence of civilisation and liberation movements.

The socio-cultural and educational background of Africa prepares the woman to be submissive to societal norms and governing order. For instance, Fafunwa reports that "Indigenous African education places considerable emphasis on character training. Indeed it is the corner-stone of African education. Everyone wants him [the child] to be sociable, honest, courageous, humble, preserved, and of good report at all times."<sup>59</sup> The African girl child grows into womanhood with this basic understanding. Based on this acquired training, she recognises from a religious perspective, as Gordon Wenham expresses, that her role to her married husband is that of, "complementarity rather than identity."<sup>60</sup> Specific to the enlightened Miship woman, in her marital relationship, she is careful to serve as her husband's supporter and encourager, and not in any way to be his rival. Here, the Miship concept of *lokot* (respect, obedience) and *aam* (help, assistance, support) become very critical. The virtue of her cultural moral training, in addition to her religious training, warrants that she keeps a functional relationship to her husband because, "to exercise authority over a man, to dominate him, is wrong for a woman. She must not assume the role of a master."<sup>61</sup> This is significant. Her supportive role to her married hus-

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vice, should not condescend to becoming a bedfellow with modern vices and mores. She is mindful of her dignity and integrity; moreover, she has eternity in view. However, the waves of civilisation, modernisation, intercultural interaction, and the likes are challenging these virtues.

<sup>59</sup> Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria*, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 68.

<sup>61</sup> Hendriksen and Kistemaker, *Exposition*, 109. A domineering and overbearing attitude over her married husband is foreign both to the virtuous traditional and godly Miship woman. The world has recorded scholars in the field of women studies and



band, "is not just assistance in his daily work or in the procreation of children . . . but the mutual support companionship provides."<sup>62</sup> She understands that, "only together can they achieve their destiny . . . [as they exist as] a social entity, building relationships with other human beings."<sup>63</sup> Her acting otherwise would negate the cherished concept of *lokot* and *□aam*. Equally, the Miship husband should appreciate and appropriate such existing mutual relationship. Masenya rightly points out the reason when she says, "African men will also experience full humanhood because if a part of humanity is oppressed, the whole of humanity will be impaired, for the two, I believe, were created to exist together and to complement each other."<sup>64</sup>

Generally, in both old and modern African experience, the African woman is a very industrious person. This holds true for the Miship woman. To be lazy and wayward is a dreaded sight for womanhood within the traditional Miship context. Given her childhood training preparatory for family life, the married Miship woman in those days was used to waking up daily before dawn to prepare for her family's comfort. She would go to the grinding mill, singing as she pulverised, depriving herself the pleasure of early morning hours' sleep. She would go to fetch water from the river and would then prepare the family's breakfast (Prov 31:14-15). Also, she would prepare food during the day and followed her husband and the children who were on training on the farm. She was the one who would go to the village market to sell grains or some article of merchandise. What is said of the industry of the Nigerian women for example, also holds true for the Miship women,

They labour in the farm or rivers and creeks from morning till afternoon or evening; harvest crops and get food materials and firewood, go to the market, prepare food for the family, care for the children and husband, do household cleaning and management, wash clothes

feminism in recent times. According to sociologists Onigu Otite and William Ogionwo, "The ultimate goal of women and feminist organi[s]ed struggles is social change with special reference to equality with men in all aspects of social life." However, they explain that coming from a "patriarchal environment" and from the perspective that "her position and role is socially constructed and culturally determined," the African wife does not think it expedient and reasonable to struggle for equality with her humanely responsible married husband. In her reasoning, since "women take care of the men [though] as subordinates" but not inferior, it seems irrational in one's opinion to struggle and compete for equality with the one you care for and one who depends on your support for success and self-fulfilment. See Otite and Ogionwo, *Introduction*, 291. Her submissive attitude not only draws her husband closer to her, but also propels him to respect, love, and care for her parents, siblings and relations. There is nothing a man will not do for his wife if she is respectful, submissive, obedient, and kind-hearted toward him and his relations.

<sup>62</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 68.

<sup>63</sup> Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 213.

<sup>64</sup> Masenya, *How Worthy*, <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/5380>.

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and plates, care for the health of members of the household, etc. on daily basis.<sup>65</sup>

While Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike is aware that the life experiences of African women differ in several ways, depending on their socio-cultural and socio-religious contexts, she acknowledges their industry. She asserts, "Their lives are full of severe hardships. They work hard carrying heavy burdens such as firewood, fetching water from faraway rivers and wells, planting, weeding, and harvesting crops, caring for children, grinding corn and preparing food."<sup>66</sup>

These chores are the true expression and reflection of the industrious spirit of the traditionally cultured Miship woman. Being industrious adds to the value of her dignity and womanhood within her cultural setting. She is unhappy when she does not perform these tasks. The woman does all of these out of excitement and her personal volition so she could add value to her family because this brings pride to her and her family (both paternal and marital families). Her respect for the culture, society, her family's name and integrity, her husband's family, even for her husband, propels her industrious engagements in commercial and home management. The spirit of her hard work reveals very clearly that, like the virtuous woman and wife of worth in Prov 31:10-31, it could be said that the well-cultured Miship woman, "is not a pampered lady cared for by servants but instead engages in her own acts of labo[u]r and industry."<sup>67</sup> She uses her hands to earn a living in line with the biblical assertion that, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him [or her] not eat" (2 Thess 3:10; cf. Prov 31:27). Her industry shows she values the dignity of labour (see also Gen 2:15). This spirit of industry in the Miship woman is captured by the song sung by them: *Ndah Naan, g#h shin man nan yak ba a langyit k# del bi gurum*. (Oh God, provide for me so I do not become envious and covetous). In

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<sup>65</sup> Otite and Ogionwo, *Introduction*, 304. Many who fail to understand the cultural context of Africa, particularly Nigeria, will interpret the woman's industry as slaving under the caprice of men. She is never coerced into her socio-cultural participation but trained from childhood to do so. This is an inherent attitudinal part of the Nigerian woman that makes her unique and a sought-after ruby by only real men who deserve her hand in marriage. To do otherwise is to remove her costly price tag. Here, the Miship woman is no exception. Because of her value, like the Ngas and Mwaghavul woman, her suitor has to pay her bride price. In addition, he is required to farm for her parents. See CAPRO Research Department, *A Harvest of Peace*, 215-16, 242-43.

<sup>66</sup> Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Christology and an African Woman's Experience," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (ed. Robert J. Schreiter; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 71.

<sup>67</sup> Perdue, *Proverbs*, 279. Even a well-educated, exposed and civilised Miship woman does not lose grip of such domestic functions because it earns the respect of her husband and his family. Even where she assigns certain household tasks to her children and housemaids, she carefully supervises them to ensure accurateness and timely accomplishment.

the Miship context, both past and present, no sensible man would marry a lazy woman.

Another industrious function that the traditional well-cultured Miship woman gladly performs is not only her playing the role of a child-bearer, but much more, her crucial role in training her children and influencing their character development. It appears the children of Prov 31:28 grow up and call their mother "blessed," not only for her godly and moral character, but this also alludes to her ability in good child training. The Miship mother bears and nurses her child by backing, breastfeeding, cleaning up its mess, having sleepless nights when the child is sick, and so on. Fafunwa admits that all African societies train their children in all domains – cognitive, affective, and psychomotor – at a very early age. He states, "At this initial stage the child is more intimately involved with his mother than his father. This closeness of the child to his mother from birth to the age of five or six is universal because it is the mother and not the family who rears the child at this early stage of his development."<sup>68</sup> Training a child at this tender age needs a curriculum that includes a carefully structured industry and disciplined attention. The child's total development is the responsibility of its mother because all that society requires and demands of its citizens are replicated in the child at a tender stage of its development. As every child is curious of its environment between the ages one to six, the African child of the Miship woman, "watches his mother's gestures and expressions. He learns his language from his mother and knows what it means when she smiles, frowns or weeps."<sup>69</sup> Being the first influencer and character-moulder of the child, the responsible Miship mother is being careful and sensitive to give the child the best training and citizenship education so that the child grows up to be responsible in the society. She puts in her best in her child's education because the shame of a child's truant behaviour in society, particularly the girl child, rests on the mother.

Like the female figure of Prov 31:10-31, traditional Miship women were involved in arts and crafts. The documented oral history of the Ngas people, who share a lot in common with the Miship people, shows that their women engaged in the craft of pot making. These pots were made in various shapes to fetch and store water, store grains, and for cooking. They were equally engaged in local textiles of making cloth from cotton. Older women taught the younger ones this craft.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Fafunwa, *History of Education*, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Fafunwa, *History of Education*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, ed., *Mwaghavul, Ngas, Mupun, Njak* (vol. 1 of *Jos Oral History and Literature Texts*; Jos, Nigeria: Department of History, University of Jos, 1981), 355, 357, 364, 378. See also Ames, *Highland Chieftaincies*, 296.

## F CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the existence of a physical early Israelite society also suggests the presence of virtuous and godly women in the land. The poets and sages interacted and drew lessons from real life rather than using merely poetic imagination. It revealed the resemblances between the woman of worth and the traditional M̄ship woman of Nigeria, reminding the latter to still uphold these godly and moral virtues. Virtues and moral uprightness are sought-after socio-ethical qualities of every morally good human society. These are first and foremost developed from the home. Although Prov 31 is primarily about wisdom personified in the female figure, it is not to be taken to reflect gender position in society, or else the whole point of the acrostic poem in Prov 31:10-31 is missed entirely. Nevertheless, the didactic and theological content of the acrostic poem can readily be applied to families and households today, given the projection of the virtues of the female figure. As Buzzell submits,

The virtues of a noble wife are those that are extolled throughout the Book of Proverbs: hard work, wise investments, good use of time, planning ahead, care for others, respect for one's spouse, ability to share godly values with others, wise counsel, and godly fear (worship, trust, service, obedience). As Proverbs has stated repeatedly, these are qualities that lead to hono[u]r, praise, success, personal dignity and worth, and enjoyment of life.<sup>71</sup>

The intention of the poet here is instructional – to point out that godly wisdom gives direction and grants success in life while moral virtues earn honour, respect, dignity and integrity for someone. The fear of the Lord is the undergirding factor for godly wisdom and moral virtues as this serves as the theological ground for the recognition by society of the woman of virtue and wife of worth in Prov 31:10-31. "Her wealth, wisdom, and success are attributed to her faith. She believes, like all true sages, that the beginning of wisdom is the belief in God as Creator and Sustainer."<sup>72</sup> On this basis, it is insisted here that the godly modern and well-cultured M̄ship woman, whether educated or not, working class or peasant farmer, living in the city or in the village, must not abandon her pride of industry, respect and wisdom for some intruding ideologies foreign to her socio-cultural and religious upbringing. For the culminating picture of this woman as model and epitome of womanhood, "reinforces the thought that anyone whose character, commitment, godliness, and productivity replicate the qualities of this woman has learned to live wisely."<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Buzzell, "Proverbs," 973.

<sup>72</sup> Perdue, *Proverbs*, 280.

<sup>73</sup> Hawkins, "Wife of Noble Character," 19.

In spite of all she wields to herself in the home and in society, she is to leave nothing to chance, "because her outlook and her influence have the solid foundation of the fear and wisdom of the Lord."<sup>74</sup> This should be, above all else, the pedestal upon which the godly, well-cultured and virtuous Miship woman is to stand and function in society. This way, she is able to appropriate the message of the gospel of salvation and hope in such a way that she has a positive influence on the society and culture in which she lives.<sup>75</sup> As posited earlier, the woman is a 100% human person, created in the image and likeness of God, just like the man. She must therefore be treated fairly and justly, be valued and given her rightful place to function in society. Thus, society (especially men and children, as is the case here in Prov 31:10-31) should express gratitude to responsible and industrious women.<sup>76</sup> We therefore stand with Constance Shisanya who draws attention to the fact that God hates injustice and social domination against any human person. As such, he requires, particularly "African men to value women as really human instead of humiliating them through painful cultural beliefs and practices."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Kidner, *Proverbs*, 184.

<sup>75</sup> Eunice Okorocho, "Cultural Issues and the Biblical Message," in *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. Adeyemon Tokunboh; Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive and Zondervan, 2006), 1467-8.

<sup>76</sup> Masenya commends the spirit of gratitude exhibited by the husband and children of this woman in Prov 31:10-31. She is quite right in observing that this seems to be lacking in many African homes. As she puts it, "...what is commendable about the husband of the Woman of Worth and her children, is that they have a spirit of gratefulness, a quality lacking, particularly from those in power. They do not take the woman's 'domestic' activities for granted, neither do they take her service for granted; they have the courtesy to express their gratitude." See Masenya, *How Worthy*, <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/5380>. We think this draws attention to the "golden rule" which requires that humans treat other members of the human society the way they would love to be treated (see Matt 7:12; cf. Phil 2:1-4).

<sup>77</sup> Constance Shisanya, "A Reflection on the Hagar Narratives in Genesis through the Eyes of a Kenyan Woman," in *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* (ed. Mary N. Getui, Knut Holter, and Victor Zinkurature; Nairobi, Kenya: Action Publishers, 2001), 151.

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