


Proverbs 31:10–31: An antithesis of pre-exilic Hebrew womanhood?



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The priests and scribes were familiar with the process of applying a manuscript or prophecy to a current context to produce relevant material for the era. It is most probable that the scribes and/or priests during the post-exilic Persian period reinterpreted the prophecies of Isaiah and Amos against the moral and social decay of the women of the Hebrew nation during the 8th century BCE to create an antithesis of that situation in the form of the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10–31. The similarity of words in the poem and the writings of Ezra could suggest that Ezra might have had a hand in the writing or editing of the poem in Proverbs 31:10–31.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The study brings Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern studies together, with both elucidating each other.

Keywords: virtuous woman; pre-exilic; post-exilic; didactic; Hebrew; poem; Ezra; antithesis.

Introduction

The didactic nature of Proverbs 31:10–31 is not in doubt, especially because of the acrostic¹ nature of the poem (cf. Biwul 2013:276; Camp 1985:12; Koptak 2003:675; Szlos 2000:98; Wolters 1988:447; see also Ryken 1984:128; contra Goldingay 2023:407) and its placement in the book of Proverbs, among others things. However, the intended lesson for the nation and its intended recipients remains unclear. Some scholars (cf. Crenshaw 1992:517–513; Kimche 2021:144; Koptak 2003:675) argue that the poem is meant to teach the rudiments of marriage life to Hebrew womanhood, while others insist that it was meant to educate would-be grooms on the marriageability or otherwise of an intended bride (see also Crenshaw 1992; Crook 1954:137–140; Lichtenstein 1982:202–211; Murphy 1990:27; Wolters 1988:446–457).²

However, considering the possible post-exilic dating³ of the poem and the social, moral and religious condition of the Hebrew nation⁴ before the Assyrian crisis and later the Babylonian captivity and exile in 586 BCE, Kimche (2021:154,155) suggests that the author, editor or redactor might have had other reasons, aside from those mentioned, for composing this poem. Kimche also discusses why it was included in the sacred records of the nation that had just returned from exile (cf. Graves 2013:46). This article intends to explore the possibility that the poem was written to educate the Hebrew nation, particularly its women, to avoid repeating the social and moral decay that characterised womanhood (cf. Is 3:16–24; Am 4:1–3; see also Kaiser 1983:84; Young 1965:160) during the 8th-century BCE and before the Babylonian captivity. Additionally, it will examine the social and moral conditions of the Hebrew nation during the ministries of both Isaiah in the southern kingdom and Amos⁵ in the northern kingdom, providing context for understanding why the author, editor or redactor may have composed the poem for didactic purposes. The article will also review existing scholarship on the poem's purpose and investigate why it was placed at the end of the book of Proverbs, considering its possible significance. Lastly, it will explore the potential identity of the author, editor or redactor of the poem and analyse their motivations for including it in the Hebrew nation's sacred text.

1. Each line of the poem is arranged according to the Alef bet (Hebrew Alphabets) in sequence.

2. These scholars have variously described her as the excellent wife, the valiant woman, the worthy wife, the woman of strength, the good wife, a virtuous woman and the marriageable maiden.

3. "The presence of the later Biblical Hebrew coupled with orthographic features which suggest the influence of Aramaism, suggest a time which could be around the exilic or post-exilic period. This suggests that the poem could have originated around the exilic and post-exilic Persian period" (cf. Yoder 2001:24–27; 32–38).

4. The Hebrew nation was divided into the north (Israel) and the south (Judah) at 722 BCE. By 732, Israel had been captured and deported by Assyria, and in 586 BCE, Judah was captured and exiled by Babylon (Graves 2013:91).

5. Amos's prophecy was mainly to reprimand the Northern Kingdom except few instances where he spoke about the Southern Kingdom. Because this article is interested in the Hebrew nation (both North and South), his work will be referred to when needed. He also spoke about the ills of both males and females, but this article will be restricted to the females as the focus is on a woman of virtue.

Methodology

The phenomenon where books or passages are not assigned authorship or are not associated with any particular individual or a group of individuals is a common occurrence in the Old Testament. It is most probable that such occurrences could be as a result of scribal activities, especially during the post-exilic Persian period. This portion of the manuscript is interested in finding out who could be the possible author, editor or redactor of the poem in the epilogue of the book of Proverbs (31:10–31). To achieve this goal, the following steps were used. Firstly, textual criticism was conducted on the passage to determine the validity of the wording. Secondly, the aim was to determine the period during which the piece of literary work could have been produced (Pr 31:10–31). The textual characterisation of the poem was determined; linguistic analysis usually studies the basic parts of a textual communication. The examination of written text through its verbal elements does not deal with its components in isolation, but rather with the basic units as they are arranged in different subunits with one another. In this case, we are talking about words and statements that are intelligible. In this respect, we are on a quest to find out what went on in the mind of the writer that made him or her to construct a particular statement (Hayes & Holladay 1987:59). In order to ascertain the possible origin of the literary works, and which epoch might have produced the document, some terms and expressions are examined with the aid of investigative queries to bring out the meaning of the poem. These questions include the following among others (Hayes & Holladay 1987:62): Does the word have other meaning besides the usual meaning? Does it have a concealed connotation? If so, why? Are they common with some author or book of the scripture? Does it have symbolic meaning? In the end, does the word help create understanding for the passage or the book? (Hayes & Holladay 1987:62).

Literary characteristics of exilic and post-exilic Persian period

Words that are of Late Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic could suggest the effect of Aramaic on the writing of the text. At the time of the exile and the period after, Aramaic was the authorised medium of communication, both spoken and written, in the Babylonian and Persian empires. Consequently, it is not unusual to identify Aramaic terms in their writings, especially those that were shaped during that epoch (Yoder 2001:20).

Yoder (2001:25) suggests that the presence of feminine abstract nouns ending with וַת (waw and teth) in morphology indicates possible Aramaic influence. These nouns are predominantly found in biblical texts from the exile or post-exilic periods. For instance, the term 'idleness' or 'slothfulness' in Proverbs 31:27 [עצלות] exemplifies this linguistic phenomenon. Furthermore, the waw [ו] often signifies an original long 'u' sound, as seen in 'garment' in Proverbs 31:22, 25 [שִׁלְבוֹן]. Additionally, waw can mark a long 'o' sound, as in 'tongue' in Proverbs 31:26, while the masculine plural ending (*im*) is

marked by yod. Similarly, the feminine plural ending in an unaccented position is represented in plain form, as in 'her arm' in Proverbs 31:17 [זרעוּתֶיהָ].

The poem could either be a product of the exilic or post-exilic Persian period because of the reasons listed in this section and also a possible creation of scribal activity, especially, coupled with its acrostic nature for didactic purposes.

Prophetic function redefined

Exilic and post-exilic transcribers gave a new meaning to predictive occupation from that of an oracle based on a vision to a clerical or copyist seer whose sources were that of reinterpretation of an existing oracular document rather than producing a new oracle. This change in the paradigm in the predictive profession is commonly found during the exilic and post-exilic eras (Floyd 2006:427; see also Davis 2022:3). Scribes during this era did more than copy and preserve sacred documents. They also reinterpreted some of the prophetic materials to address the current situation. The poem in Proverbs 31:10–31 could be one of such contextualised pieces, which was written as an antithesis of the historic failures of the Hebrew nation in poetic form. Eastwood (2021:139) in his article emphasised the contextualised and literary nature of the poem: Proverbs 31:10–31. Allen-McLaurine (2023:6,8) opines that the poem was written for a nation that was trying to rebuild itself, especially against diluted religious practices, and moral and social decay which necessitated the Babylonian captivity and exile. This phenomenon was not peculiar to the exilic and post-exilic scribes, because the priestly tradition in Leviticus did similar contextualisation to create the 'H' code in the second half of the book of Leviticus (cf. Meyer 2015:3).

Possible compiler of the poem

The authorship of the book of Proverbs is still in contention (cf. Graves 2019:202). Some scholars (cf. Dell 2006:4; Estes 2005:213; Longman III 2006:23,25) and also Jewish tradition credit King Solomon as the sole author of the book of Proverbs. Solomon might have had some connection with some portions of the collection (cf. Pr 1; 10; 25). But to credit him with the whole book is not supported by evidence. The sapiential tradition among the Hebrews might have started as an oral tradition, especially as a brief teaching aid. However, with time, it might have transformed into its current form (Bartholomew 2016:20). Fox (2015:7–8) argues that the term author should not be defined as an individual who solely wrote the document but should be expanded to include transcribers who might have intentionally changed some portions of the document. Writers of sayings, editors and redactors, among others, who might have contributed to the manuscript during its developmental processes, could all be regarded as being part of the authorship. So, when we talk about authorship, it should be seen as a composite of all these contributors from the inception of the manuscript to the composition of the book.

Ezra as a possible compiler of Proverbs

In this regard, it is possible to suggest that Ezra might have contributed to the development of the Hebrew sapiential anthology, also known as the book of Proverbs, especially, the poem of Proverbs 31:10–31, for the following reasons. The presence of official Aramaic dialect words in the poem suggests that the writer was an educated scribe living and working around the period of the Babylonian exile and/or post-exilic Persian period (Yoder 2001:24, 31; see also Quadri 2023:5).

The similarity of words between the poem and the book of Ezra (and also the book of Daniel) could suggest that both documents have a common origin. What is more, besides the presence of Late Biblical Hebrew,⁶ which is shared by both the book of Ezra and the poem of Proverbs 31:10–31, there are several words that are used exclusively by the poem (Pr 31:10–31), the book of Ezra and also the author of the book of Daniel.

Ezra was both a priest and scribe (Ezr 7:1–5, 12), two of the key professions needed in this enterprise of writing didactic pieces for catechising the new nation that had just returned from exile. The book of Ezra confirms the fact that Ezra had the task of, among others, maintaining the sacred records. A role that made Ezra either an editor or redactor of the records or the supervisor (Ezr 7:6,11). Quadri (2023:5) opines that, according to their tradition, Ezra is believed to have been the final editor of the Hebrew scripture.

What is more, Ezra's role as the leader of the second exodus from Babylon to Jerusalem (457 BCE) and the task of supervising the transfer of the sacred articles of the temple might have afforded him the chance to edit or author the poem to be included in the sacred records. Jewish tradition recognises Ezra's contribution as invaluable in the restoration and preservation of the sacred records after the Babylonian exile and the restoration of the services in the second Temple. There is a growing consensus among some commentators (cf. Donnell 2023:234, 237; Lim 2022:361) that the Hebrew scriptures were destroyed during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, particularly during the destruction of the first Temple. These accounts also credit Ezra the scribe with restoring all the sacred texts (cf. 4 Ezr 14:21, 31–33). Coggins (1996:324; see also Donnelly 2023:233) stresses that Ezra is held in high esteem in the history of the Hebrew nation, and the Quran (9:30–31) also attests to the reverence accorded to Ezra, especially in relation to his role as the one who restored the Hebrew scripture. This is attested by (Esd 14) Ezra 4, where he is recognised as a prophet (2 Esd 1:1), and he is designated as dictating by the entire 94 books to substitute what was destroyed in the exile. Out of these, 24 are set aside as scripture, and they are accessible to all (cf. Donnelly 2023:230–234; cf. 4 Ezr 14:42–48; see also 15:1–3).

⁶Dated 6th–4th century BCE, this was a little bit different from the classical biblical Hebrew which was akin to the Persian period where the imperial Aramaic script was used, according to Graves (2013:56).

Some medieval Islamic scholars (cf. Donnelly 2023:225, 226; Lazurus-Yaheh 1992:19–26; see also Reynolds 2010:190, 193, 194) raised doubts about the authenticity of the Hebrew scripture mainly because of the falsification of the restoration process adopted by Ezra. They claimed that by introducing 'dots'⁷ into the restored manuscript, he corrupted the original meaning. These scholars are not contesting the claim that Ezra restored the lost manuscripts; however, their concern is the introduction of new features or characters in his restored manuscript. This claim underscores the acclamation of Ezra as the restorer of the lost Hebrew scripture during the Babylonian exile (cf. Donnelly 2023:230). This school of thought (Donnelly 2023:232) argues that, for example, Psalm 137, which is also anonymous like Proverbs 31:10–31, was authored by Jeremiah the prophet, edited by Ezra, and added to the restored manuscript of the Hebrew scripture.

Lastly, as the leader of the second post-exilic exodus who was given official permission from the Persian king Artaxerxes to restore and maintain the second Temple and its ministration, he had the opportunity to champion the compilation and publication of a manual that would put together the wisdom of the ages for the benefit of the new nation. In this light and the late post-exilic date advocated by most scholars (cf. Estes 2005:216; Fox 2009:849; Lang 2004:188; Masenya 2004:70,72; Yoder 2001:35–37; 2003:428; contra Camp 1985:187), it is most probable that Ezra had his hands somehow in the compilation of the book of Proverbs and, by extension, a possible editor or redactor of the poem (Pr 31:10–31; cf. Fox 2015:7,8).

Literary creation or flesh-and-blood woman

Lang (2004:189) argues that there are two schools of thought when it comes to nature and the interpretation of the woman described in the poem of Proverbs 31:10–31: a symbolic and realistic flesh-and-blood figure. The symbolic figure looks at the general female imagery in the book of Proverbs as a metaphor created during the period of cultural reengineering of the Hebrew culture, especially after the Babylonian exile. The proponents of the view insist that just like lady Wisdom and lady Folly in the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs, the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 is a metaphor for the best of Hebrew womanhood created as a personification of lady Wisdom incarnating post-exilic Persian Hebrew womanhood, especially to counteract the negative imagery of womanhood portrayed in the book of Proverbs so far (cf. Clements 2003:465–466; Geysler-Fouche 2019:334). This interpretation argues in favour of a literary creation of the virtuous woman to represent the best of Hebrew womanhood (Contra Eastwood 2021:139). This is because a metaphor is a literary (device) creation, not a real human being.

On the other hand, the proponents of the real flesh and blood view of the woman in the poem insist that she could be one of the Hebrew matriarchs in the history of the Hebrew

⁷Cf. Kelly 1992: 6 (Compare with the introduction of vowels into the biblical Hebrew).

people. Names like the wife of Noah (who is anonymous) or Sarah, the wife of Abraham, have been suggested (Apple 2011:179; cf. Masenya 2004:115). However, there is no evidence to this effect making this an obvious conjecture.

Branch (2012:1,5) asserts that the portrait of the woman in the poem of Proverbs 31:10–31 was about a real woman and not an idealised personality; however, later in his submission, he wondered why the poem did not have anything about love as a common theme, which is usually associated with marriage life. The poem does not say anything about erotic passion or how they became involved with each other; nothing is said about prosperity, devotion or how attractive the woman was. However, beauty and charm, which are usually common in the acquisition of a wife and marriage in general among the Hebrews and Ancient Near Eastern cultures, were described as vain and fleeting (v. 30a). If the woman was intended to be seen as a real woman,⁸ why was her name not mentioned, or that of her husband and her children? Unless she was meant to be an object lesson for a certain didactic purpose. The Jewish tradition does not accord her the flesh and blood status of a real woman, except to say that she could represent the generality of their womanhood, among other options (Apple 2011:179). However, Eastwood (2021:139) insists the woman in the poem was a real flesh-and-blood personality who lived in ancient Israel. He does not accept that the woman in the poem is a literary creation or representation of the generality of Hebrew womanhood.

Allen-McLaurin (2023:11) summed it up very well when she stated that the lady cannot be a true representation of a flesh-and-blood person because she is without fault, she commits no errors, she does not shout at her children, she does not get angry, she does not quarrel with her husband and it appears all is well with her. She cannot be a true representation of an actual human being. It is not possible, because women are humans, implying that they are not without fault. Human beings, including women, have to deal with changes in moods such as despondency, sorrow and annoyance. Everyday women could express divergent views that could provoke heated discussions with their significant other or their family. It is not real to have someone who is always at peace with everybody. Women who are also mothers do not have every hour of every day set aside for production. They do not have ideas about every situation. Their children are not always well-behaved. I suggest that when it comes to determining who the woman could be, our first option should be that she could not be an actual flesh and blood human being (cf. Goldingay 2023:407).

If the poet aimed at presenting an ideal marriage life for the would-be Hebrew couple to emulate, then he succeeded in presenting a one-sided view of an ideal marriage where one partner carries most of the burden of marriage life. However, it is most probable that this piece of literary work was about Hebrew womanhood and its contribution to the success or otherwise of the family and the nation as a whole.

8. There is a limited appearance of women in the Hebrew Scriptures; only 135 women were named (Meyers 2011:63–64).

The historic social and moral decay of the Hebrew nation

The indictment of judgment which was pronounced on Jerusalem and, by extension, Samaria and their citizens was a result of the cumulative effect of unbridled materialism, oppression of the poor and the needy by the rich and powerful, on one hand, idolatry, and love for leisure and pleasure, on the other (cf. Allen-McLaurin 2023:6; VanGemeran 1989:476). The historical background of the period was the reign of King Uzziah (811–759 BCE). King Uzziah ruled for 52 years as the king of Judah, and his reign was marked by stability, prosperity and peace. The citizens owned silver and gold in abundance (VanGemeran 1989:447; cf. Oswalt 1986:141; see also Kaiser 1983:84; Young 1965:160). The 8th century BCE was a critical period for the northern kingdom of Israel and her southern counterpart, Judah. Israel was on the threshold of oblivion; messages of warning preached by Amos, Joel and Hosea had fallen on deaf ears. Under Uzziah, the society enjoyed great wealth; it appeared to be an opportune period. But there were societal wrongs and inequities amid religious syncretism with Canaanites' sacraments (cf. VanGemeran 1989:447).

The women of the twin nations of Israel and Judah during the 8th century BCE were accused of being haughty and indulged in adornment of precious stones, and the wearing of expensive cloth for public display. The women measured their worth by the number of precious stones they owned. They had become obsessed with outward appearance and paraded their worth in adornments and expensive clothes in public (cf. Is 3:16–24). The virtues of Hebrew womanhood were made null and void while women competed for the attention of the opposite sex (Is 3:16–24). The women of Samaria were described by the prophet Amos (4:1) as cows of Bashan. They were on the mountain of Samaria oppressing the poor and crushing the needy. They would say to their husbands, 'bring wine, let us drink!' This was a special breed of cows that were very difficult to manage, because of their demand for more fodder and attention. The men were pushed by their women to exploit the weak, the poor and the needy to please them (Branch 2012:4).

Keil and Delitzsch (1996:21) suggest that unlike the period under David and Solomon when it is claimed that (cf. 1 Ki 10:9; see also Knoppers 1992:411–417) the Hebrew nation was the bastion of justice, righteousness and loyalty to the covenant God of Israel, the prophetic ministry under Amos and Isaiah were characterised by moral decay and corruption. The outward beauty of the period was associated with the fatal germ of decay and ruin, prosperity degenerated into luxury and the worship of Yahweh was characterised by idolatry.

The rich and the powerful oppressed and exploited the poor and took advantage of the less privileged members of their community. The nation of Judah was ruled by inexperienced people and there was no justice in the courts.

The princes and ruling class of Jerusalem were known for their selfishness, materialism and oppression. However, they were not the only ones responsible; their wives and lovers were equally complicit. These women possessed an insatiable desire to enhance their beauty, accumulate wealth and engage in constant competition among themselves (Is 3:16–24 cf. Matthews & Moyer 1997:137). Social injustice was the order of the day; there was bribery of the judges; there was also the sale of persons into debt servitude upon default on small loans (Am 2:6a; Is 1:23).

The Hebrew women around this period were generally lazy while they enjoyed relaxation and leisure amid feasting (cf. Is 3:16–4:1; 3:13–15; 58:3; Am 4:1–3; 6:1, 4–6). They reclined on ivory couches while feasting and the plight of the underprivileged deteriorated. They exploited the poor and needy in their society and took advantage of their services. It is most probable that they overworked their servants and paid them less for their services (cf. Am 4:1; Is 3:14,15).

These were among the charges the two prophets: Isaiah and Amos (the ministry of Amos was mainly in the North except few instances where he spoke concerning the southern kingdom of Judah) indicted the people of Israel and Judah for their contribution to national sin and decay amid social injustice for that matter, the impending judgment of God against the two-sister nations which culminated into captive and exile.

An antithesis of the 8th-century Hebrew womanhood

The author might have created this image of an ideal woman as a result of this historical event (social and moral decay which characterised the nation during the 8th century BCE; cf. Is 3:16–24; Am 4:1–4) which contributed to the country's captivity and exile. It is most probable that the poem in Proverbs 31:10–31 is an antithesis of Hebrew womanhood of the 8th century BCE, where the author sought to create a direct opposite of the characteristics of the historic image of their women. This is because poets do not write out of nothingness but most of the time write based on societal occurrences of every day (Camp 1985:12). Bellis (2024:83, 85) stresses that the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 is an antithesis of lady Folly and the strange woman. 'Thus, she contrasts both with Folly on an abstract level and the Strange or foreign Woman on the human plane' (Bellis 2024:85). It is possible that the strange woman or lady Folly was created as a result of their historical situation and might have had some connection with the moral and social decay before the exile. A literary creation could have historical undertones in that the characters are not historical figures but they could carry history (Camp 1985:12). A careful analysis of the poem and the historic failure of the Hebrew nation, especially, her womanhood during the 8th century BCE could suggest an attempt by the author to create an opposite of the latter, perhaps as an object lesson to school the youth of the new nation.

A comparison between the industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 and the 8th century BCE Hebrew womanhood

Homemaker

The Hebrew culture placed great importance on the traditional roles expected of every woman. The Hebrew woman was expected to play the roles of a wife and a mother, to her husband and her children, respectively. By these roles, she was expected to be the nurturer of the next generation. As a result of this expectation, marriage and childbearing were inextricably associated with their self-worth and self-actualisation. By extension, the Hebrew woman's calling was a homemaker (cf. Loader 2004:695; Jud 21:16–17; Gn 1:28). A woman's inability to have children or even to get married could be seen as a great dishonour and could sometimes be equated as a curse (Gn 30:23; 2 Sm 6:20–23; see also Marsman 2003:61,68). This was the norm of the Hebrews from their beginning; however, the prevailing image of the 8th century BCE Hebrew womanhood was interested in parading their adornments in the streets. They were obsessed with outward appearance and the wearing of precious metals (cf. Is 3:16). The industrious woman in Proverbs 31:10–31 was presented as an astute manager of her home with wisdom and moderation even with the absence of her husband, while the women during the ministration of Amos and Isaiah were the opposite of the virtuous woman (4:1; Is 3:16–21; cf. Branch 2012:4).

Hardworking and industrious

The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 was presented as a hardworking woman. She was described as a 'demon' of energy or workaholic by some scholars who consider her activities superlative (Carmody 1988:73; see Fox 2009:895). She engaged in different income-generating ventures such as weaving, sowing and selling garments from her textile industry. She also invested her income from her other businesses into a large-scale agricultural estate, still with the hope of making more profit. She did not operate in one market; rather, she sold and bought her products both in the local and international markets, all of which she did, with the hope of maximising her profit. She did not eat the bread of idleness; rather, she sat up late into the night and woke up early before the break of dawn just to make sure her enterprises were successful. The same cannot be said of the women of the twin Hebrew states during the 8th century BCE. They were just lazy, flirtatious and enjoyed idleness (Am 4:1).

A supportive wife

The disruptive nature of a quarrelsome and lazy woman was not lost on the sages of the Hebrew nation. They spared no chance to warn the youth concerning the dire consequence of coupling with such a woman as a wife (cf. Pr 11:22; 21:9, 19; 25:24). However, the good fortune that a prudent wife brings

to her husband was associated with the favour of the Almighty, and the youth were admonished to seek such women (cf. Pr 18:22; 19:14). 'Every wise woman builds her house, but the foolish pulls it down with her hands' (Pr 14:1). The industrious woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 was created by a poet with these attributes which have been enumerated by the sages and the prophets over the years. It was presented at the end of the book of Proverbs as the norm for all women of the Hebrew nation to emulate. This suppletive⁹ picture of a supportive wife presented by the poet in Proverbs 31:10–31 is a sharp contrast of what prevailed during the 8th century BCE Judah and Israel. The men were under pressure from their counterparts to supply more ill-gotten gains to mollify their ravenous desire for pleasure and relaxation (Am 6:1,4–7; Is 3:16).

Mothers of the next generation

The virtuous woman of the poem of Proverbs 31:10–31 was presented as engaged in the proper upbringing of her children almost exclusively without the active involvement of her husband. She does this to the satisfaction of all including her husband (cf. Carmody 1988:73; Fox 2009:913; Pr 31:28),¹⁰ while the historic women of the Hebrew nation were only interested in feasting and relaxation. The Hebrew society places great importance on the role of childbearing and nurtured by their women-folk. This role accounts for their place in their society, and every woman aspired to such a role. However, the women of both Israel and Judah during the 8th century BCE were more concerned about their embellishments and pleasure which was a departure from their societal norm.

Benefactor of the less privileged and the poor

It was a covenant imperative for the Hebrew nation to take good care of her underprivileged and poor citizens. However, the Hebrew women during the 8th century BCE were not perturbed by the plight of the poor and the disadvantaged in their society. Rather, they sold the poor for footwear and exploited their workers just to satisfy their own selfishness (cf. Am 4:1; 6:6; Isa 3:14–15). However, the virtuous woman is presented as one who treated her workers with care and respect and perhaps paid them well for their services. 'She spreads out her palm to the humble one and puts forth her hands to the needy one' (Pr 31:20). This she did in accordance with the injunction in Proverbs 19:17; 21:13 about the duty a Hebrew has towards the underprivileged in their society (cf. Ho 2022:74).

Outward appearance

One of the areas where there is a sharp contrast between the virtuous woman and the women of the 8th century BCE is their outward beautification. The virtuous woman had as her dress code: 'Strength and honour which she puts on, and she

9. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life (Pr 31:12).

10. 'Her children grow well and her husband praise her'. This is my translation of the verse, using the LXX and also, using the figurative interpretation of the term [הַיְשׁוּרִית] which was used to call her happy or blessed by NRSV and NASV, respectively. Using the root, אָשַׁר, which in qal [אָשַׁר] can be interpreted as 'go straight' 'advance'. When it is used in the piel, it means to be called blessed (Gn 30:13; Mt 3:12,15; Job 29:11; Ps 72:17; Pr 31:28; Song 6:9; see also Hamilton 1980:80–81, 83).

rejoices in subsequent days' (Pr 31:25). The historic women of Judah and Israel were attired in expensive clothing and ornaments of precious stones, flirting with their eyes while taking short tripping steps (cf. Is 3:16–19).

Female imagery of the book of Proverbs

Geyser-Fouche (2019:334) argues that the use of the female figure as a metaphor (Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly) was created during the process of cultural reengineering of the Hebrew socio-cultural landscape. What is more, the process of remodelling was dynamic in that the process metamorphosed each time the metaphor was re-enacted. 'Although almost every wisdom corpus has applied the metaphor, almost everyone redefined it and filled the metaphor with its concept of what it represented' (Geyser-Fouche 2019:334). It is most probable that the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 was also created as a literary figure in this process of social reengineering of the Hebrew culture during the post-exilic Persian period.

It appears as if the book of Proverbs has, as its editorial policy, the role of women in the success or otherwise of the Hebrew society. The book of Proverbs, contrary to the androcentric and the patriarchal tag that has been labelled against both the Hebrew nation and Ancient Near Eastern cultures, has the role of womanhood as the central piece of its message. The Hebrew sage communicated 'in this structural way, their positive evaluation of women, over shadowing negative stereotypes' (Bellis 2024:85). Some scholars (Masenya 2004:88; cf. Bird 1974:57; 1992:9473–9481) have identified the following as the major themes of the book: motherhood, wife, the queen mother and the virtuous woman.

The first collection (1–9) has the activities of lady Wisdom and lady Folly heading the actions of wooing the youth. The second collection (10–24) explores the theme of choosing a life partner and emphasises the significance of this decision for a young man's success or lack thereof. It suggests to young men the central role that their potential wives will play in their lives and highlights how she can determine the direction of their lives. It will be difficult for anybody with this knowledge to suggest that this makes the role and the place of a woman in the micro unit of the family second fiddle. The final collection of the book of Proverbs (31:1–31), the epilogue, has the activities of two women as the main focus of the message: the mother of Lemuel, the queen mother and the virtuous woman. The rest of the collections have been sandwiched in these three collections.

The arrangement of paragraphs, headings, chapters or books in a collection is carried out to emphasise or deemphasise a certain motif he or she (an author) wishes to draw attention to (Genette 1991:261–272; see also Goswell 2016:82; cf. Zucker 2018:173). It is most probable that the author, or the redactor of the book of Proverbs sought to place the role of women in their society as the central piece of the book by placing positive role models, both at the beginning and the end of Proverbs, and by so doing correcting the negative image that has been associated with the Hebrew womanhood (cf. Bellis 2024:83, 91).

Conclusion

It is most probable that an exilic or post-exilic scribe seized with the condition of moral and social decay of the Hebrew nation, especially among her women during the 8th century BCE, sought to create a new image of Hebrew womanhood who would honour the time-tested roles of motherhood, homemaker, a supportive wife and benefactress of the less privileged members of their society. These virtues which were in short supply among the Hebrew women before the Babylonian captivity and exile were made manifest in the poetic rendition of the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10–31. Ezra might have had some role in the compilation of the book of Proverbs and the authorship or redaction of the poem (Pr 31:10–31; cf. Coggins 1996:323–324; Fox 2015:7,8). This suggestion is borne out of the roles he played as the leader of the second exodus to Jerusalem from Babylon, the roles he played with the ministrations of the second Temple, the Late Biblical Hebrew, and the similarity of the words in his book and the poem. What is more, his dual professions as a priest and scribe who worked during the exilic and post-exilic Persian periods. Finally, a Jewish tradition that accords him the status of second Moses by supervising the restoration or revision and the preservation of the sacred documents could suggest that he might have had his hand somehow in the compilation of the book of Proverbs and by extension the poem which serves as the epilogue of the Hebrew sapiential anthology, otherwise called Proverbs.

It cannot be said categorically that Ezra authored the poem of Proverbs 31:10–31 (cf. Graves 2019:202); however, it is most probable that he might have had his hands somehow in the course of the composition of the poem, either as editor, redactor, compiler or even as a scribe, because of aforementioned reasons (cf. Fox 2015:7,8).

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

P.N-M. conceptualised and wrote the article under the supervision of D.J.H.

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