

IS HE LESS THAN A ‘MAN’? READING PROVERBS 31:10-31 FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AKAN MEN KOJO OKYERE ¹

ABSTRACT

Proverbs 31:10-31 is popular among would-be couples for its celebration of the noble woman. Rightly so, the poem is about a woman and her industry in various aspects of life. She begins and ends the poem. But the poem also talks about her husband. He, also, is present in the major divisions of the poem, although he appears as a foil to the wife. Considering the diverse and expansive role of the woman within the household, African male readers cannot but ask of the role the husband plays in the family and the home. This paper offers a contextualised reading of Prov 31:10-31 within the life and thought of the Akan people of Ghana. It investigates the degree of acceptability of the portraits of the husband in the poem within the Akan community.

INTRODUCTION

Of the few texts that celebrate women in the Old Testament, Prov 31:10-31 is perhaps the best known. In Ghana, for instance, its opening inspires sermons of many wedding ceremonies. The celebrated woman in Prov 31:10-31 is referred to as the woman with “noble character” or “the ideal wise woman”.² Others prefer designations such as “the woman of worth”, “the ideal housewife”, or “the valiant wife”.³ Despite the lack of unanimity in their descriptions, scholars agree that she is the protagonist of the poem. She begins and ends the poem. Her actions resonate throughout the entire poem. Indeed, the general mood of the poem ostensibly seeks to praise and appreciate her. However, the woman is married with children. Her husband is directly mentioned three times (Prov 31:11, 23 and 28). Yet, following the mood of the text, many pay little attention to the husband. This raises a serious hermeneutical problem. When this text is used in wedding ceremonies to inspire soon to be couples, what message does it present on the responsibility of male partners in the household? With the woman singled out for praise for her industriousness, how does this reflect on the husband? Again, does the concept of a ‘good wife’ among Africans, especially the Akan⁴, parallel what we have in the text? When the Akan say, **Oyere pa sen sika** (*A virtuous wife is more valuable than money*) or **Oyere pa ye ahonde** (*A good wife is wealth*) can this be equated to the case of the woman of Prov 31:10-31? Would Akan men prefer a woman such as the protagonist in Prov 31:10-31 as a wife? These questions are important for Akan men who are struggling to come to terms with the changing gender roles in contemporary African societies.

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² Dave Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub., 2002), 285.

³ See Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 2000), 275; Crawford Howell Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1899), 542; Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 514.

⁴ The Akan constitute 47% of Ghana's population and is the largest ethnic group in Ghana. The group is made up of the Asante, Assin, Akwapim, Bono, Ahafo, Kwawu, Akyem, Wassa and Fante. The Akan occupy the southern parts of Ghana, mainly in the rain forest and coastal belts of Ghana.

The study carries out a contextual reading of Prov 31:10-31 among the Akan of Ghana.⁵ Because of this approach, the study does not shy away from questioning and sometimes rejecting symbols that emanate from the text. The general objective of the study is to explore the degree of acceptability of the text, especially the image of the husband, among Akan readers who culturally place premium on the husband as the pivot of the family and the head of the household. The significance of this study, therefore, is to put into perspective the resilience of traditional gender roles in contemporary Africa. A reading as proposed by this paper holds prospect for helping Akan readers, and Africans in general, confront the reality of contestable symbols that emanate from biblical texts and explore ways of negotiating acceptable readings of texts that are responsive to their social and cultural realities.

In carrying out the above task, the paper pays heuristic attention to historical matters. Literary dimension of the text rather is the main focus. Two reasons underline this position. First, the genre of proverbs does not lend itself to historical analysis. Second, many readers of the Bible in Africa are not trained readers; therefore, they do not consider the historical implications that shape the texts. These readers take seriously only what they read and the symbols that come out of their readings.⁶ In achieving the above goals, I structure the paper into four parts. The first part looks at the woman of Prov 31:10-31 and how indispensable she is to the household. Her husband and his actions and inactions are the focus of the second part. The third looks at gender issues among the Akan, with emphasis on the context of marriage. It offers insight into who an Akan man is and the expectations placed on him as a husband and father. Lastly, the fourth part carries out a dialogue between the husband of the woman in Prov 31:10-31 and Akan men, with the view to assessing the degree of reception of the text among Akan societies.

I. THE WOMAN OF PROV 31:10-31

Scholars are divided over the identity of the woman celebrated in the acrostic poem of Prov 31:10-31.⁷ Is she a product of history or a representative of real women of substance in ancient Israel? Is she a personification of wisdom, or an epitome of wisdom? Jewish and Christian traditions consider the woman as a historical character, a representative of exemplary women of ancient Israel.⁸ Other readings of the text, however, put forth different proposals contrary to the traditional interpretations. One such reading is that of Thomas P. McCreesh. He proposes a symbolic interpretation of the text and rejects a literal reading of it. Prominent among his arguments are the silence of the husband in the poem and the extent to which the woman of the poem embodies sapiential values.⁹ Similar arguments have been put forward by scholars

⁵ By the phrase “contextual reading” is meant the use of the Akan context as the interpretive framework for engaging the text. See Justin S. Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions” in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, trajectories and trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11-28.

⁶ Their mode of reading the text parallels what Gerald West calls “Reading the Text Itself”. He writes, “The major advantage of this mode of reading is that it starts with the text as ordinary people know it, and reads the texts as it is, which is the way in which most ordinary readers read that text, even if they do not read it closely and carefully.” Gerald West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), 40.

⁷ See Thomas P. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31” *Revue Biblique* 92, (1985): 25–46 who gives an overview of works existing before 1985.

⁸ See Waltke, Proverbs 15-31, 519; see also Jana K. Reiss, “The Woman of Worth: Impressions of Proverbs 31:10–31,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30 (1997): 141–48.

⁹ McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife” 27 – 28.

such as Kathleen A. Farmer and R. B. Y. Scott.¹⁰ Scott, for instance, argues that the poem was written as a “paradigm for a prospective bride.”¹¹

In this study, the woman of Prov 31:10-31 and her ways are taken as real historical representation of the lives of some women (possibly in the minority) in ancient Israel. This position finds support in the works Tom R. Hawkins, Michael V. Fox, Bruce Waltke and others. Hawkins posits that all the laudable traits of the valiant woman are attainable through one’s fear of the Lord. Even her economic independence, which some scholars use as a basis for their reservations,¹² does not prevent one from attaining the character of the valiant woman.¹³ On his part, Fox argues that although the rhetorical question in v. 10 demands a negative response, this should not lead us to think that the women spoken of does not exist at all. By posing the rhetorical question, the sage only emphasises the rarity of such a woman and not an issue of non-existence. For Fox, the latter would mean that the poem’s utility for educating young men is questionable, since it will only discourage them.¹⁴ Waltke also asserts that the use of the adjective “valiant” (*ḥayil*) to qualify the word “woman” (*’iššāh*) supports the description of a real woman as against and idealised or figurative character (cf. Ruth 3:11).¹⁵ For me, the choice of reading the woman as a historical representation of an ideal woman in ancient Israel is because ordinary readers of the Bible in Africa assume this position. If a proper dialogue can take place between the text and African (Akan) readers, then the assumptions ordinary readers take to the text need to be taken seriously.¹⁶

Accounting for the tussle among scholars on the issue of the historicity or otherwise of the woman is the extensive laudable attributes of the valiant woman, especially her economic activities which begins from v. 12 onwards.¹⁷ She is captured with formidable range of abilities and a pool of energy to endure many tasks (vv. 13–27). It is true that ancient Israelite society did not alienate women from economic participation.¹⁸ The main stay of Israelite economy, agriculture, was the domain of both males and females. Ruth, for instance, participated in the important agricultural activity of harvesting (Ruth 2). Rachel engaged in animal husbandry when she tended her father's flock (Gen 29:7-9). An important economic activity, which was solely the domain of women, was textile production.¹⁹ Exodus 35:25-26 reports of skilful women who spun in blue and purple colours to produce scarlet and twined linen. Some women also spun with goats' hair. Despite these instances, the economic trajectory of women was limited as compared to men. In Prov 31:10-31, however, the woman achieves a respectable economic height attainable by only few hardworking men.

¹⁰ K. A. Farmer, (1991). *Who knows what is good?: A commentary on the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids; Edinburgh: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Handsel Press, 1991), 126; R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

¹¹ Scott, *The Way of Wisdom*, 86.

¹² Cf. Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985), 83; McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife,” 26-28.

¹³ Tom R. Hawkins, “The Wife of Noble Character,” *BibSac* 153, (1996): 12–23.

¹⁴ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 890-891.

¹⁵ Waltke, *Proverbs 15-31*, 519.

¹⁶ See Madipoane Masenya who indicates that the question of the historicity of the woman is a given among ordinary readers in Africa, “Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Boasidi (Womanhood) Perspective” (PhD thesis, Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1996) <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/18145>

¹⁷ Cf. Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, 285.

¹⁸ Carol Meyers, “Women’s Lives,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Ancient Israel*, ed. Susan Niditch (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2016), 417.

¹⁹ H. J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

She is first described as seeking raw materials and working willingly with her hand (v. 13). This picture sets the tone for her astute understanding of production. She personally engages in the search for the right materials. Next, she is depicted as acquiring food from afar; a description which gives an insight into her trading activities (v. 14). She then wakes up early to ensure her household have enough to eat (v. 15). The major economic descriptions follow from the above preliminaries. They begin with her engagement in farm plantation. Three verbs put her economic activities into perspective. She first considers (**zāmmāh**) a field. This description depicts the woman as the main actor in her business, one who puts a lot of thought into her purchase of the land. The right land would have to be acquired for the specific production she would engage in. After carefully weighing all the conditions of the field, she buys it (**watīqqāḥēhû**). Previous hints of her engagement in trade (v. 13) make it possible for readers to accept her purchase of a field. As Murphy indicates, one would expect that the husband be related somehow to these intensive economic activities, but he is not placed in this context.²⁰ The woman finally plants (**nāt'āh**) a vineyard on the field. Products of vineyards such as grapes, raisins and wine were staples in Israelite homes; however, vineyard plantations were mainly owned by rich people and monarchs.²¹ Vineyards needed careful tending and huge investment usually in the form of building a watchtower to guarantee protection (cf. Is. 5:1-6). The woman's economic might, therefore, comes to the fore, and significantly, her husband is not directly involved. Other important economic activities populate the remainder of the text. She continues to engage in production (vv. 19; 22; 24). She engages in trade by selling her products personally to merchants (v. 24). She ensures that her business is profitable, keeping wake when need be (v. 18). For Bland, the extensive economic activities of the woman suggest that the description **ḥayil** is to be understood from the economic sense.²²

In all her economic exploits, her household is never neglected and is of a major concern to her. Extensive descriptions capture her as equally busy in the house. Verse 15 presents her as rising early to secure the daily needs (with respect to food) of her household. She is again captured as dutifully making garments (v. 19) for her household (v. 20) and for sale to merchants (v. 24). Her commitment to her household is captured in v. 27 in the following words, *she watches the ways of her household* (**ṣōpiyyāh ḥālīcôt bêṭāh**). In this description lies not only her material commitment to the household, but also her commitment to family values through her teachings. Thus, she establishes wisdom and values for her household members to follow. Her life is summed up in the clause, *and does not eat the bread of idleness* (**wēleḥem 'ašlūt lo' to'kēl**). There is clear evidence that the sage struggles to present the woman as hardworking and not a lazy and an over pampered lady.²³ Thus, having showered her with such exceptional attributes, the sage then prepares the stage for her praise (vv. 28-31). Her children and husband acknowledge the gift of life they have in their home.

II. THE HUSBAND

One argument against the position that the woman in the poem is a real woman is the relative absence of the husband. As McCreesh puts it "... the husband is left with little to do!"²⁴ The husband makes four appearances in the entire poem (vv. 11; 12; 23; 28). In these appearances, he is the subject in vv. 11, 23 and 28 and the object in v. 12. In the first appearance as a subject, he is juxtaposed with the wife to show his dependence on her. The two are connected through the virtue of trust or confidence (**bāṭah**). But it is the husband who puts his faith in the wife (**bāṭah bāh lēv ba'lāh** – *the heart of the husband trusts in her*).

²⁰ R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 247

²¹ Cf. Nancy Tischler, *All Things in the Bible: An Encyclopedia of the Biblical World* (Westport; London: Greenwood Press, 2006), 657-659.

²² Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*, 285-286.

²³ Perdue, *Proverbs*, 278

²⁴ McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife," 27.

A reason for the surrender of trust is given in the concluding clause; *so he lacks no spoils* (**wěšālāl lo' yeḥsār**). The choice of the noun **šālāl** (*spoil*) is interesting.²⁵ The word generally refers to what is taken or captured in war or by robbery (cf. Gen 49:27; Num 31:11; 1 Sam 14:30). It alludes to images of power struggle, victims, and oppression. But could the word have any of these senses here?²⁶ Whatever meaning is deduced, there seems to be an implicit attempt to make explicit the benefits the husband gains because of what his wife is able to do.²⁷

His second appearance as a subject (v. 23) is dovetailed into a litany of attributes of the wife. What is said about the husband is sandwiched between the wife's industry in making garments and her commercialisation of them. One may not be entirely wrong to presume that the comment on the husband is an afterthought, or wrongly placed. However, some scholars are of the view that it is the manner in which the husband pops up, even when the focus is the wife, which gives the indication that the poem is written from the male point of view.²⁸ A good reason for this position is the magnitude of benefit the husband accrues to himself this time. First, he is known in the city gates (**nōdā' baššē'ārīm**). In other words, the prominent citizens of the city honour and respect him.²⁹ Second, he sits among the elders of the land (**běšivtō'im'āreṣ**); an image that affirms his prominence in the community. When the benefit gained here is juxtaposed with that of v. 11, we realise that the former is limited to the home and is mainly material, while the latter, this time, is about his image and status outside the home (mainly social). Such value will be difficult to ignore by members of the Israelite society who place premium on the values of honour and shame.³⁰

The third normative appearance is the most engaging. Not only are we informed that the husband praises (**hālāl**) his wife, but we are also given the content of the praise in the proceeding verse. He compares his wife to other women of worth (**rabōt bānōt 'āsū ḥāyil**), but elevates her above them all (**wē'at 'ālīt 'al-cullānāh**). Here, we see the man take an active interest in the wife's tremendous achievements. Through comparison, the husband personally vouches for his wife as exceptional. As captured by Duane Garrett, the husband has no prospect of attaining fulfilment in life or becoming wise "without the good wife because she creates the environment in which he can flourish."³¹

The normative appearances of the husband are never in relation to his roles in the home. Rather, they express the husband's response to the derivative value of his wife. However, this relationship is not different from the accusative appearance, since the dependence of the husband on the wife even becomes

²⁵ The choice of the word **šālāl** is problematic for a number of commentators. See William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 666-667 who cites G. R. Driver and Winton Thomas as going all lengths to emend the word for alternative readings such as 'offspring' and 'wool' respectively;

²⁶ Fox translates the word as meaning "great find" and uses Psalm 119:162 as a support. However, it hardly erases the problem created by the choice of the word **šālāl**. For one to find a booty in which one did not have a stake in seizing does not erase the fact that there is a victim somewhere suffering the loss of his/her goods. There is also the implicit reference to power play.

²⁷ W. D. Reyburn and E. M. Fry, *A handbook on Proverbs* (New York: United Bible Societies, 2000), 654; *Contra* Fox, *Proverbs* 10-31, 893.

²⁸ See Murphy, *Proverbs*, 247; R. N. Whybray, *Book of Proverbs*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 1972), 184.

²⁹ See Toy, *The Book of Proverbs*, 546; R. C Ehlke, *Proverbs*, The People's Bible (Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Pub. House, 2001), 317.

³⁰ See Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, eds. *Honor and Shame in the World of the Bible*, Semeia 68 (1996); Thomas W. Overholt, *Cultural anthropology and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992).

³¹ Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 248.

more explicit. In this appearance (v. 12), the husband is the direct recipient of the wife's favour. As the sage puts it, *she does him good and not evil* (**gēmālothû tōb wālo'ra'**). And she does this not once or twice, but always as inferred from the Hebrew construction (**col yēmê ḥayyêh** – *all the days of her life*). If we examine closely the good the husband derives from the wife, we realise that it is mainly economic benefits with their attendant social advantage. This conclusion is based on the use of the word *all* (**col**) in the introduction (vv. 10-12) which as Waltke points out occurs in summations.³² Verse 12 is then a summary of the body of the poem (vv. 13-27); and this body mainly describes the economic prowess of the wife. Accordingly, some scholars see the good the wife gives to her husband as financial liberation.³³

III. Marriage and Gender among the Akan

According to Rhoda K. Unger, gender roles are social constructs or labels given to people based on behaviour, societal and cultural norms, and expectations.³⁴ These roles and beliefs shape and are shaped by childhood and adult experiences.³⁵ Gender roles undergo changes; they are dynamic as they take many forms and shape and defy strict categorisations.³⁶ This section examines gender roles and beliefs with respect to the relationship between wives and husbands within the Akan society.

Mainly matrilineal, traditional Akan societies place premium on women and their roles in society. Clan membership and inheritance follows the female lineage. The political system of chieftaincy dominant among the Akan allows for female participation at various levels including female chiefs and the position of **ohenmaa** or “queen mother”.³⁷,³⁸ In the religious sphere, women play the role of traditional priestesses and mediums. There are a number of social intuitions reserved for women such as widowhood rites and puberty rites. But this is one side of the story: a side which presents women as equal partners to men and who complement the work of men to maintain social order. The other side is a picture of women subordinated to men in all aspect of social life. So a woman chief, for instance, is an exception and not a rule. She also bears a man's name since the stool name is almost always male. In matters of inheritance, though the female line is the framework for identifying candidates, the system stresses sex that is males are considered first before females. Akan society, significantly, emerges as a patriarchal society.

³² Waltke, *Proverbs 15-31*, 522.

³³ See Toy who argues that although the good and harm might refer to the general prosperity of the household, financial liberation is more at stake, *The Book of Proverbs*, 544. See also Waltke, who indicates that if the poem portrays a real woman then the true value of this woman lies in her economic exploits as she “emerges as an important contributor to the economy of the family and of the community” *Proverbs 15-31*, 517.

³⁴ Rhoda K. Unger, “Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender,” *American Psychologist* 31, no. 11 (1979): 1085-1087; See also Jean M. Twenge, “Attitudes toward Women, 1970–1995” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1997):

³⁵ K. M. Blee and A. R. Tickamyer, “Racial Differences in Men's Attitudes about Women's Gender Roles,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57, no. 1, (1995): 21-23.

³⁶ Margrethe Silberschmidt, “Have Men become the Weaker sex? Changing life Situations in Kisii District, Kenya,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, no. 2, (1992): 237-253.

³⁷ The term “queen mother” is not to be understood literally as the mother of the chief or king. Rather it is a political position for females which parallels that of the chief (mainly a male). All *Ohenmaa* (queen mothers) are females and no male can assume that position, but some females can assume the position of a chief.

³⁸ Irene K. Odotei, “Women in Male Corridors of Power,” in *Chieftaincy in Ghana: Culture, Givernance and Development*, ed. Irene K. Odotei and Albert K. Awedoba (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2006), 82.

A household in traditional Akan societies consists of a man and his wife plus their children together with other relations such as the man's father, his maternal uncles and aunts, his sisters and their children. This extended family is led by the senior male or headman who usually inherits the position. Decision-making process revolves around this male figure together with other elders of the family. Socialisation of young members is the responsibility of the headman and his elders including women, as well as other adults in the group. This is an important function of the extended family since young ones gain recognition and social status by conducting their actions in line with the values, norms and conventions of the society. As part of the socialisation, boys and girls are made aware of the difference in their sexes and its implication for their respective roles as they ease into adulthood.

Marriage is an important stage in the life of an adult Akan. An unmarried adult is considered a 'child'. Together with the family, the man initiates the marriage process. It is he and his family who goes to consult and request for the would-be- bride from her family. The reverse is hardly the case and a woman who initiates intimacy with a man is considered a "spoilt" woman. An Akan man's ego is boosted by the fact that he initiates and marries his wife. In sealing a marriage, the man pays the bride price. This payment gives the husband right over the wife, and he can claim compensation in case of adultery by the wife.³⁹ These rights do not go for the wife. Akan men often say, **oberima na ɔware obea, nnye obea na ɔware oberima**, (*it is a man who marries a woman and not the reverse*). This demonstrates the prominence of males in marriage from the initiation process to the actual living experiences of the couple. No matter the heights of a woman's achievements within the society, it is believed that her status is given to her by her husband. One proverb states that, **obea ho ye fe a, efi ne kunu** (*If a woman is successful, it is due to her husband*). Thus, by default it seems that women must always be dependent on men. Women are not to stifle attempts by their husbands or to usurp their power in the home.

Among the Akan people, the husband exercised full control over the wife. According to Sally Baden et al., "once married, the husband is seen as having full control of the wife including sexual monopoly and the right to claim damages in the case of adultery".⁴⁰ With this control also come the responsibility to maintain the wife and children. The superiority of the husband within the society is borne out by the proverb **Obea ye turom mu nhwiren; ne kunu nso ye ne ho ban** (*A woman is a flower in the garden, and her husband is the fence*). The saying indicates that men protect women who are considered to be vulnerable. Indeed, Akan society places premium on men who are able to maintain their home with respect to ensuring the needs of their wives and other members of the household. A man who fails to meet this responsibility is ridiculed and considered a failure.

In the Akan culture, women must seek protection, and marriage is one of the important avenues through which this protection could be achieved. A married woman holds a higher status than an unmarried woman for the reason that a married woman can take on the important tasks of bearing children, raising a family, doing household work, and pleasing a man; all of which fulfils her "role" in the Akan society. Perception of the woman's vulnerability leads to her protection. Thus a prospective husband is warned of the huge responsibility ahead after contracting his wife. Among the Asante, for instance, the husband is liable for any debts the wife incurs and not the vice versa. When the wife creates wealth, however, she sends it back to her family.

An important household responsibility of the husband towards the wife is the giving of money. Two types exist here, the **akɔhoma** (popularly referred to as the 'chop money')⁴¹ and the **dwatire** (seed

³⁹ Tad Crawford, "Ghana: Marriage and Divorce," *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and unofficial Law* 3, (1971): 31.

⁴⁰ Sally Baden et al., *Background Paper on Gender Issues in Ghana* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 1994).

⁴¹ "Chop money" refers to the daily stipends given by the husband to the wife in order to provide for the daily living expenses, especially food.

money for business). The former is a compulsory act that every husband is supposed to carry out. It is the **akɔhoma** which ensures food and other necessities are constantly available in the house. This, however, was a difficult task for several men, hence the proverb

Akɔhoma no bɔ ne yaw ntsi na Kwanyarku abrantsɛ guanee gyaa ne yer

It is the problem of family maintenance which compelled a married man Kwanyaku to desert his wife

Dwatire is not compulsory for a husband, but certainly an honourable act for a man who gives his wife such money. In their report, Baden et al. observe that husbands sometimes provide wives with capital to start a business; although the men see their action as an investment, which will enable the wife to contribute to household expenditure.⁴²

Economic roles of the husband and wife appears to be complimentary than exclusive. Within farming communities, tasks are unevenly shared between the man and the woman. Men carry out tasks that demanded considerable force such as clearing the land, and ploughing the ground. Women are given less demanding tasks such as planting and harvesting. Some women also take to petty trading to support the home. Ultimately, it is the husband who should be seen as in charge of the economics of the household. This way he strengthens his image within the community as a ‘man’.

The above are generalisations it has to be acknowledged. However, sometimes the roles are blurred as men do a lot of household chores, recline in decision making, and have limited influence in economic affairs of the household. Some women on the other hand go out and engage in economic ventures, they are active in the household with respect to decision making, having power in the way family resources are used. However, many times, these are treated as exceptions which as much as possible should not be encouraged.

IV. AKAN MEN AND THE HUSBAND OF THE NOBLE WIFE: NEGOTIATING THE SYMBOLS OF “MALENESS” IN PROV 31:10-31

In the traditional Akan society, men are in charge both at the family level and the communal level. Indeed as Baden et al put it, “the husband is under an obligation to maintain his wives and children.”⁴³ Order and security revolves around them. Women on the other hand are maintainers of the home. Continuity of the family and bonding of members revolve around them. These respective roles can be summed up in what the sociologist, Talcott Parson presented as the “instrumental” role of men and “expressive” role of women, also known as the sex-role theory.⁴⁴ Working within the framework of functionalism, Parson argues that these respective roles are central to maintaining a functioning family and society. Although feminist critics have pointed out the deficiency in the sex-role theory, many communities in Africa continue to operate on the assumptions of the theory. In what follows, an interaction between the text and the Akan life and thought is carried out in order to determine the extent to which Akan men (and Akan society) will be receptive to the symbols derived from Prov 31:10-31. Three symbols guide the analysis: the economic strength of the wife, the dominating presence of the woman in the home, and the perceived absence of intimacy.

Economic Strength of the Wife

⁴² Baden et al., *Gender Issues in Ghana*, 9.

⁴³ Baden et al., *Gender Issues in Ghana*, ix.

⁴⁴ Sex-role theory was concerned with how gender roles were assimilated through socialisation. See Stephen M. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 2002), 19-23.

An incontestable observation in Prov 31:10-31 is the economic prowess of the wife. This is demonstrated in several economic activities she undertakes (vv. 16-19). She has the power to buy and sell, including the purchase of a land. Indeed, the extent of her economic activities portrays her as the breadwinner of the household.⁴⁵ Such an image from the text, for Akan men, raises questions. What economic role does the husband play? How does her economic prowess affect the image of her husband? Waltke is of the opinion that the extensive economic roles of the wife free the husband for other communal duties (v. 23). For him, there is no lopsided expression of functions in the household. The woman's freedom is derived from the husband. He therefore writes, "the paeon of praise to the valiant wife assumes the husband has founded the home on a sound economic foundation (24:27); within that context his wife can settle down and function to her maximum ideal."⁴⁶

In the first place, Waltke senses the problem the husband's absence creates and attempts resolving it by the argument that he is the foundation of the wife's success. He may be right in suggesting that the foundation of the household had been properly laid by the husband. He builds his argument from the internal evidence of the entire book of Proverbs, which assigns the responsibility of choosing the right partner to the husband (cf. Prov 24:24) as well as admonishing husbands to be active in taking charge of their lives and their household. This reading of the poem dovetails into some aspects of Akan thoughts system which confers on the man or husband the credit of the woman's or wife's success. For instance, the Akan proverb, **obe a ho ye fe a, efi ne kunu** (*If a woman is successful, it is due to her husband*) demonstrates this point. As indicated above, among the Akan people, the husband can help the wife with **dwatire** in order for the wife to assist in the economic duties of the household. When a husband carries out this act, he gains the respect of others within the community. Such a man is deemed matured and wise. In many cases, however, the wife's economic activities are to be subservient to that of the husband. She supports but does not take over the responsibilities of the husband. Akan people are of the view that the economic strength of a wife is not supposed to be displayed openly otherwise it will be construed as a usurpation of the powers of the husband. When that happens, the husband is mocked by the society as subservient to the wife. This perspective of the Akan people contradicts the picture of the noble wife as given in the poem. The wife is not only economically powerful than the husband, but in addition, her strength is displayed openly such as her trading activities. There is next to no economic role assigned to the husband which casts doubt on any help the husband may have granted to the wife. Admittedly, the poem assumes a peaceful home with cooperation between the husband and wife. The wife is described as doing good to the husband all her days (v. 12) and the husband is full of trust and praise of the wife (cf. vv. 11; 28). This mood supports Waltke's thesis that both husband and wife are instrumental to the economic prowess of the latter. It may be because of this cooperation which confers on the husband the honour among the elders of the community (v. 23). Although the mood of the poem portrays a harmonious home, one with love and trust between the husband and the wife, some Akan men will not hesitate to reject the image of the subservient husband, especially when the wife openly engages in economic activities while the husband is laid back. Demonstrating that a man controls affairs in his household is imperative for Akan men. Their image of themselves and how they are perceived in the society partly stems from the extent to which they see themselves as being the pillar around which everything, including the economic viability of the family, revolves around. Even when a wife who is economically strong derives her strength from her husband who might be lowly, she needs to make him feel he is in control. Otherwise, the husband's ego is bruised and he will be mocked by his colleagues. The wife on her part will be looked upon with disdain by the society as deviating from her role of being submissive to the husband.

Dominating Presence of the Wife

⁴⁵ McCreech, "Wisdom as Wife," 27-28

⁴⁶ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 520.

In addition to the economic strength of the noble wife is her dominating presence in the household. She is in charge of almost all domestic affairs, including the provision of food and clothing for her husband and children. She is responsible for the upbringing of the children (v. 26) and also carries out charity on behalf of her family (v. 20). Such extensive portrayal of her domestic activities leaves us to wonder the place of the husband in all this. In African cultures, domestic chores, to a large extent, are the domains of women. A good wife is measured by the extent to which she successfully undertakes her domestic chores which includes the provision of food, caring for the children, and tidying of the home among other activities. Among the Akan, for instance, a wife is judged by how successfully she manages her home with respect to handling domestic chores.

Although Akan people give the woman greater leverage in household activities, the man is still perceived to be in charge. He is the final authority. The hustle and bustle of a woman in the home revolves around tasks perceived to be less dangerous and require less power. The proverb **obeaton ntorewa, na onton atuduru** (*A woman sells garden eggs and not gunpowder*) is illustrative. Women are expected to do less dangerous tasks such as cooking, bathing the children, fetching water, and keeping the home tidy. Men are required to carry out the more dangerous and power intensive tasks such as chopping logs into firewood, construction of huts, repairing of roof, etc. In Akan thought system, men are better positioned to face adversity than women. Bravery, courage, firmness, and leadership are traits of men and they need to be portrayed first in one's household. Thus, a man's ability to control his household is a great measure of success among the Akan people. Taking the issue of discipline, for instance, although women are mostly with kids, men are expected to instil discipline in their children. Akan women are fond of referring cases of kids' insubordination to their male partners for them to carry out the disciplining of the children. Another area where a man's leadership is displayed is in the event of bad news or misfortunes. As the head of the family, it is the man who needs to display ultimate responsibility in handling cases of death, illness, and other misfortunes. The point being laboured here is that within the Akan life and thought, the man is pivotal even in domestic issues. How does this idea compare to the husband of the noble wife in the text?

Like his absence in the economic roles within the household, the husband is missing in the domestic scene. Once again, we are faced with the problem of whether it is the text which is silent on his roles or this is a man who does little in the house. Whatever the case might be, as the text stands, we see little of the husband when it comes to domestic issues and decisions. Of course, we can again raise the earlier argument of the trust and praise of the husband indicative of the cooperation and unity in the home. In that case, his absence does not equate to his irresponsibility or ignorance of what takes place in the household. By this argument, we agree with Waltke who sees an almost perfect household per the descriptions of the text.

To stretch the argument, however, one cannot help but to ask how a perfect household has the husband, who is supposed to be the lord (**ba'al**) of the household, limited extensively in his responsibilities. In the few instances we see the husband act, he praises the wife for her industry and he sits among the elders. There is no hint of his involvement in the affairs of the home apart from his consent for what the wife does. The portrait of the husband is like a master and his servant. Although, the master may praise and trust his servant for the services rendered to him, the master thrives at the servant's expense. Such a relationship, however, rests on hierarchical exploitations. So like the superior subordinate relationship between a master and his servants so is the picture of the husband and his noble wife.

One may argue that this analogy of master and servant expresses the Old Testament portrayal of the nature of the relationship between husband and wife. Per the husband description as **ba'al** (lord), he is the lord over his household. According to Johannes Pedersen, the word **ba'al** (lord) in the context of marriage means possessor and master.⁴⁷ Thus, the husband owns what exists in his household, including

⁴⁷ Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1929), 62-63.

the animals and his wife. Pedersen, however, continues that the word **ba'al** does not only characterise the man as master of his house, "but also tells us something of the character of his rule. He is not an isolated despot, but the centre from which strength and will emanate through the whole of the sphere which belongs to him and to which he belongs". In other words, the husband does not relax in his duties, but partakes in the daily responsibility of the household by serving as the pillar from which the household edges forward in its ambitions. If this is the case, then Pedersen's understanding of who a husband is in ancient Israelite society does not commensurate with the husband of the noble wife in Prov 31:10-31.

Similarly, the Akan word **owura** (*master/lord*) is mostly used in household contexts as reference to the man or husband. Etymologically, the word means one who owns or possesses. Accordingly, the husband in Akan context is the owner of his household; he heads it and ultimately bears responsibility for the progress of the household. However, like the ancient Israelite context where the wielding of power by the man is somehow held in check, similarly, certain aspects of Akan culture limits the unbridled display of power by the husbands. One such cultural tradition is the matrilineal family system. Because the woman and children belong to their family apart from the man's, when a husband is seen to be abusive to his wife and children, the family of the wife can remove them from the marriage home. A family's survival rests with women. Akan families look out for their women as they are the life blood to their existence. Ideally, a family would prefer their women to be beneficiaries in marriage contexts and not the vice versa. To have a man who entirely derives his value and substance from his wife is not an acceptable example for Akan people; even more so for the family of his wife who may consider elements of exploitation in the relationship. The norm is the reverse where the man gives his all to ensure the comfort of his wife and children.

The perceived master servant relationship in Prov 31:10-31 leads some scholars, especially women, to question and sometimes reject the image of the woman in the text. For instance, Renita Weems questions the severity of the burden placed on the woman as she struggles to manage the home all by herself. She writes,

Let's look at the story of this woman who works all day and all night and who represents her husband's reputation and she cooks and she sows and her children call her blessed. Now, I think this is an exhausted woman, really! ... What woman would write this? Celebrating exhaustion? Celebrating being crazy out of your mind? Who would write this but a man? And so I charm them with that, and then I ask: 'Is this really the way you want to live? Aren't those of us who live that way exhausted?'⁴⁸

For Weems, a deconstructive reading of the poem reveals the uneven relationship between the partners; a situation which needs to be rejected. She cautions women therefore not to fall prey to the persuasive prowess of the poem which in reality enslaves them instead of valuing and liberating them.⁴⁹ She again hints that because men are likely producers of such a text, men would more likely be easily receptive to the poem's ideals. This is where I disagree with Weems. For me such an uneven responsibility between husband and wife, one in which the husband is made to completely depend on the wife, is unacceptable for many men who per their culture are supposed to be heads of their households. As the poem stands, the woman is at the centre of the household, with the man at its fringes. Within the Akan society, this is not an acceptable scene; the reverse is more often the case.

Perceived Absence of Intimacy in the Home:

⁴⁸ Renita Weems, "Proverbs 31 in a New Interpretation" in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Silvia Schroer and Sophia Bietenhard (Sheffield: JSOT, 2003), 18.s

⁴⁹ Weems, "Proverbs 31," 18.

Murphy raises an important observation many fail to see in their reading of the poem.⁵⁰ The woman in all her activities pays little attention to the husband. What Murphy is referring to is the intimate relationship that should characterise any healthy marriage union. He writes, "... her intimate feelings are never touched upon. She does not seem to have time for him"⁵¹ Considering the fact that the book of Proverbs does not shy away from teaching readers the importance of intimacy among partners (cf. Prov 5), questions emerge over the celebrated woman with respect to her preoccupation with tasks to the neglect of the intimate needs of her husband. Well, the husband does not seem to mind, since there are no complaints coming from him. But once again, some men cannot help but wonder whether a wife can be said to be 'ideal' or 'noble' without her paying attention to the intimate needs of her husband.

Although an industrious woman is a plus for every man, many men do not want to substitute their physiological needs for sex and intimacy for a hardworking woman. One may argue that the presence of children within the family of the woman of Prov 31:10-31 is evidence of sexual contacts between the partners. However, we cannot equate procreation to pleasure attained from sexual intimacy. Among the Akan, sex in marriage is encouraged. When a man fails to engage the wife in intimate encounters, he is ridiculed. The proverb, **se wo efow fow na woa dɔa, obi dɔ ma wo**, (*Someone takes over your responsibility as a man when you fail to do so*) is illustrative. The idea expressed here is that either spouse cannot blame someone who carries out the conjugal right of a partner who refuses to do so. There are again several sayings which challenge and ridicule men who fail to engage their wives sexually. The two sayings below are typical.

“wo ti ho na ye de wosikan dwa nakan”

(you sit there unconcerned while your knife is used to cut python)

“wo ada so won nan gu abontee”

(You are asleep but your leg is outside)

Both sayings are mostly directed to men who for some reasons have their women being 'accessed' by other men. Thus, they contain elements of mockery directed at such men. Among the Akan, failure for a partner to carry out his or her sexual role in marriage is ground for divorce.⁵² A woman's family will not hesitate to fetch her from a marriage where the man is unable or refuses to carry out his conjugal rights. So could a man leave his wife or choose to bring in another woman (which is mostly the case) when the wife is unable to meet his sexual needs. If Murphy's observation of the lack of sexual intimacy between the noble wife and her husband is right, then some Akan men would sympathise with the husband and reject the notion of associating with him.

CONCLUSION

Prov 31:10-31 is ambitious in its attempt to praise the woman. In the words of Döderlein, it is “a golden A B C for women”⁵³ The poem showers on the woman qualities such as trustworthiness, resourcefulness, foresight, industriousness, generosity, business skills, and the fear of Yahweh.⁵⁴ She emerges in the text as a superhuman. But she has a husband. Throughout the poem, her husband remains in the background. He is portrayed as doing nothing more than sitting in the city gate praising his wife. Such literary maneuverings on the part of the sage clearly is to make the husband a foil to the wife. This, however,

⁵⁰ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 249.

⁵¹ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 249.

⁵² Crawford, “Ghana: Marriage and Divorce,” 31

⁵³ J. P Lange et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Proverbs* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2008), 257.

⁵⁴ Hawkings, “The Wife of Noble Character,” 12.

comes with a cost. The image of the husband as the head of the household is compromised. However, one can understand the sage, if one is to read this poem as an attempt to showcase the potentials of women. There have been modern parallels to such ambitious attempts to wrestle with the discrimination of women, which have led to the unbalanced situations of focusing on the plight of women at the expense of men. An example can be seen in the area of reproductive health. With regard to interventions to improve reproductive health, attention was given to women because women were seen as most vulnerable.⁵⁵ The resultant effect has been that healthy reproductive practices among couples have been compromised and the desired goals of the interventions largely unattained. Again, some feminists, in their zeal to redeem the image of women, attack and condemn everything manly. They construct for themselves a society which men have little or no place.⁵⁶

It is perhaps such attempts to rescue the image of women which led the sage of the text to impose on the woman the extensive qualities. However, as evident from the analysis of the poem, an asymmetric portrayal of roles, even with a redemptive goal, may rather lead to resistance among certain readers. If the goal is to demonstrate the integral place of women and their contribution to the household, it should be done in a manner that upholds the principles of partnership and equality of roles which are key to successful management of the household. Admittedly, the poem hints at this when it presents the husband as in support of the wife. It, however, missed it when it drastically reduced the place of the husband in the household.

In relating the poem to Akan men, several hermeneutical challenges arise. Should Akan men look for such women as wives and remain in the background as their wives serve them? Can an Akan man carry himself as a 'man' when he assumes the passive role assigned for the husband? Although the dominant symbols from the text present asymmetrical roles, there are still several valuable meanings that can be adopted for individuals today. First, the uncritical acceptance of the poem as a good model for soon to be couples need to be reassessed. Couples using this text as an inspiration for their marriage should openly discuss their reactions to the text, paying attention to what they approve and disapprove. Thus, the text need not be treated as a divine template for marriage. Second, the limited, but insightful symbols such as the husband's trust of the wife and unity in the home should be highlighted. Prov 31:10-31 will continue to be used at wedding ceremonies to inspire couples. However, in order to maximise its value, Akan people will need creativity, openness and critical engagement with the text in order to negotiate meanings that are relevant to their socio-cultural context.

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⁵⁵ Edith Alejandra Pantelides "Male Involvement in Prevention of Pregnancy and HIV Infection: Results from Research in Four Latin American Cities" in *Report of the Meeting of WHO Regional Advisors in Reproductive Health WHO/PAHO* (Washington DC USA: World Health Organisation, 2002), 15-18; Jessica Davis et al., "Male Involvement in Reproductive, Maternal and Child Health: A Qualitative Study of Policymaker and Practitioner Perspectives in the Pacific," *Reproductive Health* 13, (2016): doi: [10.1186/s12978-016-0184-2](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-016-0184-2)

⁵⁶ Radical feminism, for instance, remained committed to autonomous and independent women groups, and pushed for social change; change of rather revolutionary proportions. See Judith Lorber, "The Variety of Feminisms and their Contributions to Gender Equality" in *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*, ed. Judith Lorber (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2005), 16-18. See also Christina H. Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 19-40.

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