

**PROVERBS 31:10-31 IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT:  
A BOSADI (WOMANHOOD) PERSPECTIVE**

by

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**DEDICATED**

**TO**

**Bomma - Tlou! And Ngwaladi!**

**my mother-in-law,**

**my sisters**

**and all**

**women struggling**

**under kyriarchal**

**post-apartheid**

**South Africa**

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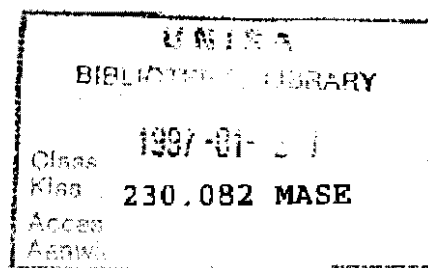
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## SUMMARY

One of the presuppositions of the present research is that readers and their contexts play a significant role in the interpretation of biblical texts. The key text of this thesis is Proverbs 31:10-31 and the main readers are African women in a kyriarchal South African (Northern Sotho) context. Given their context of a multiplicity of oppressive forces (racism, sexism, classism and African culture), how can these women read Proverbs 31:10-31 appropriately with a view to their liberation? The researcher proposes a new woman's liberationist perspective, a *Bosadi* perspective, a perspective committed amongst others, to the African-ness of the African woman in South Africa. The question is: If Proverbs 31:10-31 is read from a *Bosadi* (Womanhood) perspective, how will the Northern Sotho women in a South African context find the text - a text emerging from a kyriarchal Hebraic culture? Will they find it to be oppressive or liberative or will it be found to be containing both elements?

The present researcher, like many reformist women liberation biblical scholars (cf some feminists and womanists), argues that though the Bible emerged from patriarchal cultures, and contains elements oppressive to women, it also has liberative elements. Through the use of socio-critical hermeneutics, reception criticism and historical-criticism, evidence supporting this came to light as the present researcher re-read Proverbs 31:10-31 from a *Bosadi* critical perspective. It is therefore argued that when the Bible was used by the previous proponents of apartheid to subordinate people of other races, Black Theologians re-read the Bible from a Black perspective and used it for the racial liberation of Black South Africans. Likewise, an average South African woman, particularly an African woman, is basically a victim of male interpreters who use the Bible to subordinate women. It is the task of all African women to take the responsibility upon themselves to use appropriate tools in re-reading the Bible in order to discover that the Bible does not only alienate them, it is also the liberating word; the word which makes more sense to them because of their relationship with the Word which became flesh (Jn 1:1).

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION : PROBLEM STATEMENT

### A. CONTEXTUALISATION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The life of a Black South African woman in general and a Northern Sotho woman in particular, is shaped by a variety of factors. In chapter two of this thesis, each of these factors, particularly as it affects a Northern Sotho woman's liberation hermeneutics, will be looked into. A few introductory sentences regarding each of these factors will suffice.

Currently, colonialism is generally regarded as being the most important factor that has shaped South Africa's history. Though the present Northern Sotho woman finds herself in a post-colonial, post-apartheid South Africa, the effects of colonialism are still evident in most spheres of her life. Colonial rule influenced this woman to despise almost every aspect of her African culture. Most Northern Sotho women feel strange in their own land, while they also feel dependent for almost everything on Whites. The system of apartheid that the former South African regime justified on biblical grounds, served to place the Black South African woman at the bottom of the occupational ladder. She became the first victim of racism, class stratification and sexism (cf Mpumlwana 1992:380).

Being Black, she was despised probably because Blackness was identified with negativity - being seen as evil and anything derogatory.<sup>1</sup> As Blacks under the apartheid regime we were destined to be the slaves of Whites. Some of the Whites justified this attitude as one read from the Christian Bible. As slaves, Blacks were exploited by a system of cheap and in some cases, harmful labour. It is thus not surprising to note the large number of poverty-stricken Blacks in post-apartheid South Africa.

Apart from racism and classism, sexism is another oppressive force in the life of a Black South African woman. The latter has always experienced and still experiences, patriarchy imposed by both the African culture and the socio-political system in which she is entrapped. Such a system has merely helped to reinforce an existing sexism displayed by the patriarchal African culture on women by contributing to their being placed at the lowest level of the kyriarchal ladder.

As mentioned earlier, the Bible was often used to legitimate the oppression of Black people in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> The same Bible was used, and is still used, to legitimate the subordination of women. In this respect I prefer the terminology used by Lerner (1986:234). She prefers the word 'subordinate' to 'oppress' because she argues that the latter gives the impression that the one oppressed is powerless. This is not the case with all Black women in the country. They have some measure of power though in most cases, it is not legitimated. Even though Black women form the vast percentage of the South African population, they are typified by amongst others, invisibility and silence. In the churches, they form the larger part of the membership but they have had virtually no sisters to interpret the Bible for them. Their humanity has been defined for them and the Bible has also been interpreted for them (cf Ackermann 1992:94; Kretzschmar 1992: 106-110).

It is my intention to read the text of Proverbs 31:10-31 from the perspective of a Northern Sotho woman. For the purposes of my thesis, I want to read the text from the perspective of the liberation of African women for the following reasons:

1. Past and present biblical scholarship in the country and elsewhere has basically been White and male. Brueggemann (1993:19) is right when he says:

The imagined world of privilege and disparity is treasured by all of us who live in the advantaged West. It is treasured more by men than by women,

more by Whites than by Blacks, but all of us in the West have enormous advantage.

Since the main emphasis has been on text-orientated approaches, the latter has had little to do with the context in which the Bible readers have found themselves. As a result of such approaches, scholarly Bible interpretation has remained a luxury for a few academics. Even in Black churches, pastors who were trained at Bible colleges or Universities, were trained according to the 'Western' way. Ukopong (1995:4) seems to reinforce this view when he holds that due to the fact that African biblical scholars have been trained in the tradition of Western biblical scholarship, they read the Bible through an interpretive grid which was developed in the Western culture. Contextual approaches, particularly liberationist approaches, were unheard of till recently. People could be excommunicated from churches or even imprisoned for employing such approaches in their hermeneutical endeavours. I think, however, that such approaches are addressing the real needs of the hearers, particularly the needs of the oppressed.

The apartheid government failed to suppress the voice of the oppressed. Many Black theologians (cf Prof I Mosala, Dr F Chikane, Prof T Mofokeng and Prof S Maimela) were aware of approaches that made Black people receive the message of the Bible according to the White way. These scholars thus propagated a Black theology: an approach to study theology against a Black context. This approach was a breakthrough because the Bible could, for the first time, be read from the perspective of the many oppressed people in the country. That was not sufficient, however, because Black theology failed to take into account the situation of Black women as people in their own right. Oduyoye (1994:192) appears to be endorsing my observation:

**Just as Christian theologians (mostly Western and mostly male) never took seriously the situation of oppressed people when formulating their ideas, so African male intellectuals, including theologians, have not given much attention to women in their various enterprises.**

Black theologians still failed to address the androcentric nature of the Bible, while they also failed to challenge the all male biblical scholarship. Though some did touch on female issues (cf Mosala 1988; Mofokeng 1986) it was not done extensively. Yet, Black women, as I have already pointed out, form the vast majority of Bible readers in the country. The scarcity of scholarly biblical interpretation aiming at aiding the liberation of women, has contributed to my decision to employ this perspective in the reading of Proverbs 31:10-31. I want to speak on behalf of the many suppressed, silenced voices of people who are attached to the Bible in one way or another, people who find a contradiction between the liberating message of the Bible and their real life experiences of marginalisation, subordination, and exclusion particularly with regard to Bible interpretation. The above factors are the reasons for my preference for a Black woman's liberationist reading of the Bible.

Moreover, I prefer to name my perspective an African woman's liberation reading<sup>3</sup> of the Bible and not the commonly used 'feminist' reading due to the following reasons:

- a. The word 'feminist' is Western in origin to which the agenda of feminist biblical interpretation bears. I hope to elaborate on the Western feminist hermeneutic framework at a later stage. At this stage it suffices to mention that Western feminist biblical scholars (in line with their context as White women) are mostly bothered by sexism as the enemy, in particular as it manifests itself in the biblical text, hence their critique of the patriarchal contexts that produced the biblical text and the androcentricity of the Bible text.
- b. As a Black South African woman, my context is totally different. I experience multiple oppressions like racism (cf the effects of the policy of the apartheid government), the sexist African culture, classism as well as sexism in general. In my case, sexism is but one of the many oppressions I experience in society. Unlike my White counterpart, whose male counterpart is at the top of the ladder,

my male counterpart is disadvantaged by his race but sexism advantages him over me. As a woman, right at the bottom of the South African kyriarchal ladder, I will definitely read the Bible differently from a Euro-American feminist or even from an African-American womanist.

My reading and interpretation of the Bible will have to take into account my whole context. This does not mean that my hermeneutic endeavours will be immune to Western feminist elements - where necessary, the latter will have an impact on my work.

I would also prefer to call my hermeneutic framework, an African (Northern Sotho) woman's liberationist one for I would like to frame an approach which is essentially African. Previous attempts by Black women liberation scholars in the country (cf B Bennett 1986, D Ramodibe 1989; B Mncube 1992, and J Jordaan 1992) have not paid particular attention to the context of African women in South Africa. If that was done it was not done extensively enough and in most cases, the African culture was seen through Western eyes, and many positive aspects of this culture were ignored. While I admit that African culture is sexist, an aspect frequently noted by Western critics, this research will also acknowledge that, like any other culture, it contains positive elements. In my hermeneutic endeavours, I want to give a balanced view of the African culture.

I have chosen Proverbs 31:10-31 because within my Evangelical tradition, the text is believed to outline the qualities of a 'good woman'. It is thus a text mostly cited to those who are about to be married. Elsewhere I have argued that in many African contexts of Bible interpretation, the Bible is interpreted in a literal, simplistic way. In such settings, male interpretations are embraced without question (Masenya 1995a:154). I would argue that such interpretations in most cases, only help to keep patriarchy, the status quo, intact.

Patriarchy is defined differently by the various feminist frameworks (Mainline, Womanist, Asian and African etc). I intend revisiting the term when I deal with some of



these frameworks at a later stage. At this stage Lerner's (1986:239) definition of the word will be in order: In its wider definition patriarchy

means the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does *not* imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources [Lerner's italics].

In this research I intend examining Proverbs 31:10-31 with a hermeneutics of suspicion, one which is favoured by many feminists. According to Sakenfeld (1988:56), a feminist, broadly speaking, is one seeking justice and equality for all people and one who is particularly concerned about the fate of women - all women - in the midst of 'all people'. Such a definition means that issues relating to racism, classism and ecology, including peacemaking, are part of the purview of feminism. As a result, perspectives included in this definition are extremely varied, though the main subject matter is limited to the Bible and theology. This definition, though not devoid of problems, seems to fit the hermeneutics of women's liberation which I intend developing in this research. Such a perspective is furthermore shaped by the unique context in which I find myself as a woman in a Northern Sotho context.

Feminists prefer a hermeneutics of suspicion when reading the Bible text due to their perception that the Bible is an androcentric document, a product of patriarchal contexts (cf Sakenfeld 1988:6; Schneiders 1989:4; Williams 1993:187; Bird 1994a:81; and Fewell and Gunn 1993:11-16). In employing such a hermeneutics, I hope to interrogate the text to see if the text is really useful to Northern Sotho women. Can the text empower them and thus contribute towards their liberation? Will it help them recover their positive self-image as African Christian believers, an image that has been destroyed amongst others, by the way their culture has been interpreted for them by Whites? The following will be

among the questions I hope to raise regarding the present paean: Whose standards are used to qualify the woman portrayed in this poem as good? For whom was the poem written? What was the purpose of its writing? Which class of women does the woman portrayed in this text represent? How did the women audience of the time (if that can be traced) feel about the picture of the woman portrayed in this text? Did it have any (liberating) message for them or was it viewed as perpetuating the patriarchal status quo? These questions, amongst others, can be combined at this preliminary stage to constitute the main problem investigated in this research: If Proverbs 31:10-31 is read from the perspective of the liberation of women,<sup>3</sup> which possibilities can it offer to Northern Sotho women in South Africa? In the final instance, is it empowering or dehumanising?

Questions about the text such as the ones raised above have never or seldom been raised in the past. As can be expected, exegetes who previously worked on the text were basically White males, whose focus has basically been on the text and its context. They have generally studied elements such as the author's intention, the audience and related matters (cf Scott 1965, Kidner 1985, McKane 1970). The context of the reader, in particular the woman reader, was scarcely addressed. The text has usually been interpreted from a male perspective even in Black contexts. It is also unfortunate that even in feminist circles, there have only been a few (if any) feminist biblical scholars who re-read this text. To my knowledge, Claudia Camp is the only Euro-American feminist biblical scholar who has to a greater extent read passages from the book of Proverbs (including the present text) from a feminist perspective. With this study, I thus hope to read this popular text which has shaped and is still shaping the lives of my African sisters from an African woman's liberationist perspective and adding something new to traditional White male scholarship.

## B. POSTULATION OF A HYPOTHESIS

Though it is indisputable that the Bible is mainly a patriarchal document (cf Schneiders 1989:4; Okure 1989:56; Fiorenza 1983:29, and Sakenfeld 1985:56) I intend arguing that it can still offer liberating possibilities to people, including Northern Sotho women in South Africa. Religion and in particular, the religion(s) of the Bible, play(s) (a) significant role in the lives of these women. Most African people in South Africa, especially women, regard the Bible as a book of God (cf the comment by the African Independent Churches in West 1991:158). They tend to accept its message unquestioningly.

Okure (1989:52) maintains that the Bible contains both liberative and oppressive elements. Tolbert (1983:126) speaks about 'the Bible as patriarchal authority' versus 'the Bible as liberator'. I in turn would argue that at face value, (this will be looked into as I proceed with this study), the paean of the Woman of Worth in Proverbs 31:10-31 reveals both liberative and oppressive aspects. Some feminist biblical scholars would argue that the image of a woman presented in the Book of Proverbs is that of a liberated one. Bird (1974:41) maintains that in the Book of Proverbs, women are not chattel, nor are they simply sexual objects. She sees them as persons with intelligence or willpower who, can, from a male perspective as shown here, either break a man - (an adulterous woman reflected in chapters 1-9) or make him (a good woman as shown in Proverbs 31:10-31). Camp (1985) and Brenner (1993) feel that the kind of woman presented in this text has some independence.

I would therefore argue at this preliminary stage that if read from an Afrocentric, women's liberation perspective, Proverbs 31:10-31 can offer partially liberating visions for Northern Sotho women in South Africa. Thus, the hermeneutics employed in this study is not only that of suspicion, but is paradoxically at the same time, a hermeneutics

of consent. I suggest that the Bible has positive (liberative) as well as negative (oppressive) elements.

### C. MOTIVATION FOR VALIDITY OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Women's issues or matters pertaining to gender discrimination are important contemporary themes in post-apartheid South Africa. Different people hold different opinions regarding what characterises an ideal woman. In most cases these differences have far-reaching consequences for marriage set-ups. In her comment on a similar situation Okure (1989:55) contends:

This universal phenomenon of the plight of women in marriage deserves special study, for the present breakdown in the marriage system all over the world may not be unconnected with the refusal by wives to allow themselves to continue to be treated as the property and slaves of their husbands. Often this legitimate reaction is wrongly interpreted as the woman's rejection of her maternal role. Yet no sane woman, and certainly no African woman, would see anything belittling in motherhood per se.

Today Northern Sotho marriages break down as a result of women's rejection of the dictates of the patriarchal or rather kyriarchal status quo in their lives. The word 'kyriarchy' which is frequently used by Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (1994:xix) is preferred to patriarchy for it suits the multi-faceted oppressions (sexism, racism, classism, and the African culture) experienced by African women in South Africa under their lords (cf the Greek word '*kyrios*' meaning master) - males. This is not surprising for in Africa in general, women are held in little esteem. A woman is traditionally expected to submit to the authority of males (their fathers and or their husbands) without questioning their authority.

On the other hand, as stated earlier on, Black women in particular, and not only men, are believers in the Bible as the 'Word of God'. For many of them the Bible is the source of

comfort amidst the troubles they encounter in their daily lives. This study aims, amongst others, at investigating whether the Bible text (a text from a patriarchal culture), which is one of the popular books among the church-going Black women in South Africa, can offer a liberating message for them. If that is the case, Black (African) men will also experience full humanhood for 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.

## **D. METHODOLOGY USED FOR THIS STUDY**

### **1. FINDING AN OWN APPROACH**

The methodology used by the present researcher is close to what Ukopong (1995:3-14) calls enculturation hermeneutics. According to Ukopong (1995), enculturation hermeneutics designates an approach to biblical interpretation that seeks to make the African, for that matter any socio-cultural context, the subject of interpretation. He further argues that to make a specific socio-cultural context (be it the text's context or the interpreter's) the subject of interpretation, means that the conceptual framework, its methodology and the personal input of the interpreter, are consciously informed by the world-view of and the life experience within that culture. Ukopong's commitment to an approach that takes serious consideration of the African context of African Bible readers, and which highlights the significance of readers and their context in our hermeneutical endeavours, has a greater resemblance to the approach and concept. I wish to develop in this thesis - a *Bosadi* approach.

The present hermeneutical strategy is mainly shaped by the researcher's experiences in an African socio-cultural context. Hence, like Ukopong's enculturation hermeneutics, readers and their contexts are some of the most significant components of biblical

hermeneutics to the work of the present researcher. My experiences, perceptions and imagination of what ideal womanhood is in my African Christian context, have prompted me to develop a liberationist approach to the reading of Proverbs 31:10-31. My present context is replete with various definitions of ideal womanhood from a biblical perspective. As I have noted earlier, Proverbs 31:10-31 is generally cited as a text containing the qualities of a good/ideal woman. As I read the text in my own context, imagination, perceptions and images of an ideal woman shaped by my context as an African woman scholar, make me form a story about what ideal womanhood is and should be. Such a story (*Gestalt* to use Snyman's (1995b) terminology), created in my mind as I read Proverbs 31:10-31, makes me derive sense out of (or extrapolate, to use Bosch's (1991) terminology) an ancient as well as a strange text. My reading, in turn makes me come up with a new story about the old text. In this way, I rewrite my own text and the latter becomes meaningful to me (cf Snyman 1995b). In such an endeavour, I do not pretend to be reproducing the truth conveyed by the original writer or poet in our case. That will be a difficult or even an impossible endeavour. According to Carroll (1993:81), a historical or literal reading of the biblical narratives is not possible. Due to their different plausibility structures, they are of no use to other, different communities in whichever way they are read. What happens is that they are transformed in order to fit into the readers' symbolic worlds to serve their own purposes. The story, therefore, is continuously being constructed by readers of the prose narrative (or the poem in our case) that purports to be an account of people's past experiences with a god. The point is that the ultimate dimension is not the verbal structure in the text, but the *Gestalt* readers form of it in the reading process (cf Snyman 1995b:151).

This is more or less similar to what Bosch (1991) calls the self-definitions of the Christian readers. The self-definitions of the previous Christian audiences of the Bible are not sufficient. There is a need for a critical hermeneutic approach going beyond the (historically-interesting) quest of making explicit early Christian self-definitions. This

hermeneutic strives to encourage dialogue between those self-definitions and all subsequent ones including those of ourselves and our contemporaries.

It accepts that self-definitions may be inadequate and even wrong. So its aim is that those self-definitions be extended, criticised or challenged. It assumes that there is no such thing as an objective reality "out there", which now needs to be understood and interpreted. Rather reality is inter-subjective, ... it is always interpreted reality and this interpretation is profoundly affected by our self-definitions (Bosch 1991:24).

Ukopong's (1995) enculturation hermeneutics also entails a critical analysis of the interpreter's context:

- a. Such an analysis enables her to be aware of the influences that affect her as she goes about reading the text. She is also enabled to use them positively and thus exercise control over them.
- b. Secondly, such an analysis helps the hermeneut in understanding the text in a contemporary setting.

A *Bosadi* approach, as we will later observe, critically analyses the African culture, the culture which is one of the factors that has shaped my reading of Proverbs 31:10-31.

A *Bosadi* critical perspective, which sets great store by the liberation of women, in particular African women, may succumb to inserting/reading women's wishes or desires into the text. A critical analysis of the reader's context thus, may help alleviate such an eisegesis. As a way of curbing the latter, a *Bosadi* concept will include the reconstruction of a socio-cultural setting of the text studied - Proverbs 31:10-31. According to the *Bosadi* approach, like that proposed by Ukopong (1995) above, the context of the biblical text is also significant.

Another significant aspect of Ukopong's enculturation hermeneutics for the *Bosadi* approach is the awareness of and commitment to the enculturation movement which seeks strong interaction between it and the Christian faith with all aspects of African (or any culture's) life and thought. The interpreter, according to Ukopong, should be committed to the Christian faith and to the process of actualising the biblical message within the context (cf Ukopong 1995). The preceding statement reminds us of Bosch's (1991) concept of extrapolation - making the biblical text's message relevant to the present (new) context.

Bosch (1991:442-443) also acknowledges the significance of the faith perspective in our liberation endeavours:

Liberation theology has helped the church to rediscover its ancient faith in Yahweh, whose outstanding qualification - made him the Wholly Other - was founded on his involvement in history as the God of righteousness and justice who championed the cause of the weak and the oppressed (cf Deut 4:32, 34f; Ps 82).

According to Bosch (1991), faith and life are inseparable and integral; liberation therefore has to be effected at three levels:

- a. From social situations of oppression and marginalisation.
- b. From every kind of personal servitude and
- c. From sin.

Orthodoxy and orthopraxy therefore need each other and each is adversely affected if sight is lost of the other.

In the section on the presuppositions on which the present research is based (cf E below), I will argue that for many African women, the Bible is regarded as the Word of God and is therefore a document of faith.



Reading the Bible in my context is tantamount to listening to God's voice in the Bible through faith with a view to extrapolating its message to the present context. The Bible is hardly ever read from a critical perspective. What matters most is the transforming power of the message of the biblical text (cf also Sugirtharajah 1991).

The *Bosadi* approach will thus remain incomplete if the faith element of the reader is not taken into account. The extrapolation (cf Bosch 1991) of the biblical material only makes sense in the context of a faith community. The present researcher's community of faith is Christian. This means that my hermeneutical perspective will be shaped or defined by the Judeo-Christian tradition as reflected in the Christian Bible which is only one among many religious traditions in post-apartheid South Africa. If it is critical enough (cf Bosch 1991), the *Bosadi* approach must also be willing to enter into dialogue with other women's liberation approaches from other religious traditions in the country.

In the light of the discussion in the preceding section, the following are the methodologies which form the basis of the present thesis:

- a. Reception criticism
- b. Socio-critical hermeneutics
- c. Historical-criticism

## 2. RECEPTION CRITICISM

Lategan (1994:1-2) describes reception theory as the sustained effort to include the situation of reception in both theoretical reflection on and empirical investigation of communication (cf Snyman 1991:6-7).

In reception criticism, the sender and recipient occupy the same position, the former therefore needs not be foregrounded at the expense of the latter (Lategan & Vorster

1985:15). Reception critics would therefore argue that in the same way as a text shapes the reader, the reader produces a text.

Reception criticism entails a shift from the traditional investigations into author, redactor, amongst others, to readers as producers of texts and constructors of meaning (Vorster 1986: 352). It operates in a twofold way:

- a. It deals with actual receptions which are prompted by a text and
- b. It also focuses on how a reader, prompted by textual constraints and indicators, reads a text in a particular way.

In reception criticism, reading is viewed as an act of production, an act of making a new text. Any reader outside the text, produces a reading on the basis of his/her understanding. Vorster (1986:354) argues: 'In reality, every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self'.

There are two concepts basic to reception theory:

- a. the concept of the implied reader and
- b. the indeterminate nature of the text.

The implied reader is an attempt at reconstructing the reader whom the author has in mind to elicit from the text the overt and covert signals. Though the implied reader is a theological construct, it is significant because it represents the stance adopted by the real reader as he/she approaches the text (Lategan 1994:107).

The second significant concept dealing with the indeterminacy of the text is particularly aimed at explaining the participation of the reader. According to Iser (cf Lategan 1994:108), the text has deliberate 'gaps'. The latter calls for the co-operation of the

reader and entices him/her to supply the information that is missing in order to make sense of the text.

The reader thus becomes co-responsible for the actualisation of the text as meaningful communication. Malina (1991:254) holds a more or less similar view when he argues that interpretation is in actual fact supplying what is missing in the text so that the latter may mean something. For him, there is essentially only one approach to the Bible and that approach has its roots in sense perception and socialisation of readers. He argues:

What occurs when one reads or hears depends largely on the reader's and or listener's interests. For every text, whether written or spoken, evokes what can never be put into a text by any writer or speaker, and this is common sense, socially shared understanding of the reader (Malina 1991:254).

Reception criticism seems to me to be in line with the approach followed by most or all women liberation scholars. According to the latter, the readers and their social contexts play a significant role in the interpretation of texts. There is no value-free biblical interpretation. In this regard, Schüssler-Fiorenza (1994:29-30) argues:

Feminist theology as a critical theology of liberation seeks to develop not only a textual-biblical hermeneutics but also a historical-biblical hermeneutics of liberation. It challenges biblical studies as 'objective' textual interpretations and value-neutral historical reconstructions fundamentally.

From the problem statement of this research, it is clear that my focus is on the readers and in particular, African women readers in their unique social situation of oppression in South Africa. At this initial stage I would like to argue that this social context will in, one way or another, shape the way in which they read the Bible. Their social context, therefore, as well as that of the original (implied) readers will in due course receive attention.

By applying the theory of reception criticism, the researcher hopes to highlight the role women readers, and in particular Northern Sotho readers, may play in text production.

### 3. SOCIO-CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS

#### a. *Feminism as a critical theory*

Thiselton (1992:377) defines socio-critical hermeneutics as an approach to texts (traditions and institutions) which aims at penetrating their surface-function with a view to exposing their role as instruments of power, domination or social manipulation. This type of hermeneutics aims at achieving the liberation of the victims of the social manipulation.

In the light of this definition, it becomes understandable that socio-critical hermeneutics serves as a framework for most liberation hermeneutics, including feminist hermeneutics. Feminism as socio-critical theory acknowledges that society is characterised by pain and suffering caused by the domination of some human beings, in particular women, by others. It aims at unmasking ideological biases which society as well as the biblical text have against women with a view to achieving their liberation. It forms part of what is called transformational hermeneutics (cf Martin 1987:380; Bosch 1991:189).

According to Martin (1987:380), transformational hermeneutics is a kind of *Gestalt* shift in which the formerly subsidiary interests (like those of women in our context), have become focal and the former focal interest has changed and now serves the new focal interest instead of dominating it.

Feminism, particularly post-modern feminism, is intensely political (Harding 1986:194). Schussler-Fiorenza (1992:8) shares a similar view when she argues that the term feminism, as distinct from gender or woman, signifies a political concept or movement.

Feminists, including biblical feminists or feminist theologians argue that knowledge is not objective; they thus criticise the 'objectivity' of past male epistemologies. According to them, knowledge is ideological and it always serves (or served) the interests of the dominant groups - male or patriarchal interests.

Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza (1992:32) observes:

Readers of the Bible are generally not aware that biblical histories are neither reports of events or transcripts of facts but rather rhetorical constructions that have shaped the information available to them in the light of their religious or political interests.

Robert Carroll (1993:84) shares a related view when he argues about the Hebrew Bible:

... As such the Bible in Hebrew is part of an elite intelligentsia and the study of the Bible in its original languages an element in the maintenance of ideological purity.

It therefore becomes understandable that biblical feminists as critical theorists approach the Bible with a hermeneutics of suspicion with the intent of unmasking whatever ideological bias might exist in the text. As we have noted in the statement of the problem of this research, the main cause of attacking the biblical text is its alleged patriarchy and androcentricity.

Feminist hermeneutics as socio-critical hermeneutics thus, is a hermeneutics of suspicion, because it suspects traditions and texts of being instruments of power for the dominant tradition. With regard to the present research, the researcher asks which role was played by Proverbs 31:10-31, a text from an Israelite post-exilic setting which was patriarchal in nature, in the society of its time. Was it meant to promote the liberation of women as valuable human beings thus criticising the status quo of the time which viewed women as being inferior to men? Or was this text (which probably comes from a school setting

with sons as the audience, of the rubric 'my son' in the Instruction genre of Proverbs) one of the tools of perpetuating the varied forms of oppression that a typical Israelite woman experienced? Was an ideal woman's picture, from the point of view of the male author of this paean with his male audience, the same as that of an Israelite woman who could not even become a member of the priesthood?

Which portrait will a woman's liberation hermeneut obtain as she *critically* (socio-critical hermeneutics) *reads* (reception criticism) this poem? Can it offer liberating possibilities for her situation?

Thiselton (1992:460) notes that feminists use experience as a trans-contextual principle of critique. For biblical feminists for example, the experience of women should be foregrounded in our hermeneutical endeavours. Feminists, therefore, emphasise the significance of the readers or the experience of the readers in the reading of the Bible. They openly admit that there is no value-free interpretation of the Bible. This 'value-free' characteristic of knowledge reminds us of the post-modern paradigm (cf Brueggemann 1993; Martin 1987; Nicholson 1989).

Achtemeier (1988:51) however, questions this foregrounding of experience, even at the expense of the Word of God:

If we make our own experience the measure of the Word of God, it is very easy to ignore or discard anything in the biblical Word that is unpleasant or that calls us and our lifestyles into question. When our experience is the criterion, what overcomes our tendencies to self-interest, to pride, to rationalization, and to sin? *What keeps us from avoiding the demand to love our enemy in the form of some domineering, patronizing male, for example?* (emphasis mine).

Achtemeier's caution is worthy of note for if we wish to do justice, as far as it is possible, to a scientific reading of the text, it will not benefit us to purposefully bring our biases

into the text. A socio-critical theory should also help us to be self-critical. Although McLaren and Hammer (1989:49) argue from a pedagogical viewpoint, their words are worthy of note here:

The task of critical pedagogy (hermeneutics) is to increase this self-consciousness, to strip away ideological distortion, and to assist the subject in its own historical making (brackets mine).

Feminists therefore, have to be aware and also critical of their own ideological biases even as they criticise the ideological bias of the biblical text.

One of the methods I will use in the present research can therefore, also be regarded as socio-critical. I prefer to name it a *Bosadi* (Womanhood) critical perspective. Though it has points of resemblance with both feminism (hence my elaboration on feminism in the previous lines) and womanism, it is neither of the two. My agenda is different from that of the preceding philosophies. It has a different context, a South African context as opposed to the African-American and Euro-American contexts of womanism and feminism respectively. As an approach committed to the African-ness of an African woman in South Africa, it has more in common with its African-American counterpart.

In Chapter Four of this thesis, I introduce this 'new approach' - 'new' at least in the South African context - where I elaborate more on it.

b. *The Habermassian theory of communicative action*

I should, however, indicate that though reception theory has its strengths, it does, like any other theory, have its limitations. One of these is a tendency of readers to read everything they want into the text. Though one of my presuppositions in this research is that there

is no value-free biblical interpretation, one should still respect the integrity of the text *as far as possible*. In order to achieve this, I hope to enlist the help of the communicative action theory proposed by Jürgen Habermas (1984). His main concern, which is actually in line with the main aim of this research, is to establish a solid foundation from which the task of liberation and emancipation of society can proceed. His critical theory aims at the establishment of a free society. He distinguishes between two types of social action:

- a. action oriented towards success, which includes technical manipulation of the environment and strategic action as well as a manipulation of others and
- b. action oriented towards understanding, or, what he calls communicative action. This communicative action is subjected to certain validity claims including comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness or sincerity and rightness (cf Botha 1993:76)

Communication aimed at understanding must assume these validity claims, a situation which will facilitate understanding and ensure successful communication in terms of mutual consensus regarding the meaning of the particular utterance or exchange. Nevertheless, this open and accessible communication is only an ideal and is never realised in everyday life. However, all communication is aimed at this ideal situation (Botha 1993:77).

Though this is merely an ideal, if pursued, it will help the reader to approach the text with openness and truth, while simultaneously willing to accept even elements which may not be in accordance with her/his interests. Moreover, it will help to make the hidden unpalatable elements of the text, for example that the text was used as an instrument of power by the powerful of the time to subordinate the weak, known to the reader. Such an approach will help both the reader and the text not to manipulate each other, thus both will avoid, to use Habermasian terminology 'systematically distorted communication'. By this he means a communication in which at least one of the participants is self-



deceived with regard to the apparent agreement (cf Botha 1993:76) implied by the communicative action.

An approach of openness to Bible texts is necessary, since, according to Botha (1993:80), such a deliberate questioning of the possibility that the Bible could contain serious communicative distortions or could be the fixation of a certain ideological position, has never been done in the past. Botha (1993:80) argues: 'The critiques were always much more subtle, and nuance, and seldom directly critical of the Bible in this sense'.

This approach seems to me to be in line with what Schüssler-Fiorenza terms a feminist critical hermeneutics of liberation. This is a hermeneutics that sees the Bible as both oppressor and liberator of women. It does not only criticise the androcentric texts of the Bible, but goes back to their social-historical contexts. On the one hand it employs the *critical methods* and impulses of *historical scholarship* and on the other hand the *theological goals of liberation theologies*.

#### 4. HISTORICAL-CRITICISM

Historical criticism is an umbrella term incorporating aspects such as literary criticism, tradition history and form criticism amongst others. With the advent of the Renaissance, there arose interest in the history of classical antiquity (Deist & Burden 1987:90). Such an interest did not escape the Bible interpreters. As Deist (1991:49) observes, roughly from the Reformation onwards, there was a growing insistence that the Bible should be interpreted in terms of its background. A historical-critical exegetical method is therefore a method that analyses and interprets textual references in terms of the historical background of the text (cf Deist 1991:44).

Like any other exegetical method, a historical-critical method has its own strengths and weaknesses (Deist 1991). Mention of a few of these will be in order:

a. *Weaknesses of the historical-critical method*

Firstly, its emphasis on the historical uniqueness of the biblical accounts may widen the gulf between the biblical text and the Bible readers, thus locking up God's revelation in a unique historical period.

Secondly, its emphasis on the 'objective' study of biblical documents and the role of cold logic in the process, may have a variety of adverse effects; it may create an impression that through sheer intellectual effort, a Bible reader may arrive at an 'unmistakable objective truth'. Indeed feminists and other post-modern critics (cf Martin 1987; Brueggemann 1993; Nicholson 1987) have criticised this method on the ground of the preceding fact. Brueggemann (1993:8) argues:

The problem is that in the great career of Western objectivity very few people were let into the room, which was peopled largely by white males of a certain class and perspective. Indeed it has been precisely the admission of others into the room that has made our treasured objectivity (and consequent hegemony) fragile and exposed.

b. *Strengths of the historical-critical method*

Firstly, its emphasis on the meaning of the text in its own age frees exegesis from the dogmatic framework in which the Bible was interpreted in the past.

Secondly, it affords insight into biblical times and especially, the growth process that the biblical text underwent.

The preceding portrayal of historical-criticism is what Martin (1987) calls a classical historical-criticism. He defines it as being objectivist, pursuing mechanical analysis and working with Cartesian split consciousness. With the emergence of a post-critical

(modern), holistic paradigm however, historical-critical analysis has come to function within the historical-political task of interpretation:

It functions not only to discern the dynamics of the socio-political world of the text in its past context, but also to discern the same dynamics in the contemporary context of the interpreter (Martin 1987:381).

I prefer Martin's definition of historical-criticism in its post-modern context. In this thesis I shall use the historical-critical method to reconstruct the socio-political context of the key text of this research (Proverbs 31:10-21) as well as to analyse the socio-political context of the clients of this thesis - Northern Sotho women in South Africa.

My preference for this method in reconstructing the socio-political context of the text is my conviction that, in hermeneutical endeavours - though we may not escape the trap of our biases - we must try as far as it is possible to honour the integrity of the biblical text.

## **E. PRESUPPOSITIONS AND TEXT THEORY**

### **1. PRESUPPOSITIONS UNDERLYING PRESENT RESEARCH**

The following general observations and presuppositions are taken seriously and approached critically in the present research:

#### **a. *General Observations***

- The Christian Bible, in particular the New Testament, plays a role in the lives of many church-going African people in South Africa, especially in the lives of women; hence interpreters may be assured that the Bible is interpreted to

interested people. However, many young people deem it a White man's book, an ancient book which has no relevance for contemporary life.

- The Bible is viewed by many Africans as the Word of God, hence it is regarded as authoritative to their lives. As 'the Word of God' the Bible may not be questioned. There thus exists a tendency among many Northern Sotho women to avoid critical studies of the Bible.
- Due to the past history of White male Bible interpretation, many Black people especially women, are not conversant with liberationist approaches to the Bible. Most women, particularly in Evangelical circles, shun such critical studies. Yet such approaches, if properly employed, may be found to be rewarding and life-giving.

b. *Presuppositions*

- The Bible is androcentric, coming from patriarchal cultures. It also has liberative elements. Through the hermeneutics of suspicion, the present research will unmask the ideological nature of the text and use a hermeneutics of remembrance (cf Schüssler-Fiorenza 1992:54-55) to reveal the liberative nature of the text. Fiorenza (1992:55) says: 'It (creative imagination) utilizes all kinds of artistic media to elaborate and enhance the textual remnants of liberating visions. It retells biblical stories from a different perspective and amplifies the emancipatory voices suppressed in biblical texts'.
- There is no value-free Bible interpretation. Readers and their contexts play a significant role in Bible interpretation. Renita Weems (1993:36) argues that one's socio-cultural and economic context exerts great influence, not only on how one

reads, but what one reads, why one reads, and the purpose for which one reads. 'In other words, readers and reading strategies exceed the power of isolated ancient texts in themselves' (Weems 1993:37). As I have noted, the present research is basically geared at reading the Old Testament from an African woman's liberationist perspective.

- Humanity, both Black and White, women and men, old and young, poor and rich, Christian and non-Christian, consists of human beings created in God's image. The past history of apartheid in the country has however, shown that some humans like Blacks, women and the poor, for example, are viewed as 'others'. Their full humanity was thus not acknowledged. History has also shown that people from other non-Christian religions have been ostracised. Educationists (cf Rankin et al 1994; Burden 1995; Jenkins & Sileo 1994), amongst others, advocate 'inclusion' as a possible approach in their individual fields of specialisation. In education, for example, educationists advocate inclusion as an educational approach to help people who are physically challenged. This approach developed as a reaction to approaches believed to be discriminatory towards people deemed 'not normal' (disabled, disadvantaged). It affects issues concerning the handicapped, racial and gender differences, language and cultural issues, as well as socio-economic factors (Jenkins & Sileo 1994:84).

This approach is necessary even in Bible interpretation in the light of its past history in which women and Black/African people were to a large extent excluded from participation. I thus intend to include African women, make them a hermeneutical focus, accept them for what they are: part of the full humanity of God.

## 2. THEORETICAL TEXTUAL FOUNDATION OF RESEARCH

One of the key issues in White feminist interpretation of the Bible is the question of the authority of the Bible. As we will indicate in chapter two, feminists have different views about the authority of the Bible. For some (cf Russell 1985), the Bible has authority in their lives for ‘... it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ .... Its authority in my life stems from its story of God’s invitation to participation in the restoration of wholeness, peace, and justice in the world’. Phyllis Bird (1994a:87) is of more or less the same opinion: ‘The authority of the Bible does not rest in the infallibility of its statements, but in the truth of its witness to a creating and redeeming power, which can and must be known as a present reality’ (cf also 1994b:337). For Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (1983:32), however, experience (rather than the biblical text) particularly, the experience of oppression and liberation which is personally and politically reflected, is the criterion of appropriateness for biblical interpretation and evaluation of claims concerning biblical authority.

On the other hand, the Asian feminist theologian, Kwok Pui Lan (1993:19) does not take for granted the notion of the Bible as the revealed Word of God. She supports the view of the missionary movement, ‘The Bible was to be the "signifier" of a basic deficiency in the "heathen culture". This is a Western construction superimposed on other cultures, to show that Western culture is the norm and it is superior’. She questions the claims of a ‘universal Gospel’ because she feels that it does not only claim to provide the answer, it also defines the question! This reminds one of the missionary movement in South Africa where the missionaries went to the extent of defining the African culture for Africans themselves! The claim that there exists only one universal gospel, only one authentic text, needs revisiting particularly in a South African multi-religious post-apartheid context. The Bible no longer enjoys the privileged position it used to enjoy during the apartheid government with its policy of Christian National Education. The

Bible was imposed on Africans (or all non-Whites) by the Westerners as being the only revealed word of God. Does this imply that God never revealed herself/himself outside the Western culture? Does that imply that God's revelation is limited only to the Scriptures of the Jews and the Christians? I suppose questions like these may have motivated a Third World theologian, such as Banana (1993:17) to challenge African Christian scholars to consider the possibility of rewriting the Bible 'so that God can be liberated from dogmas that make God the property of ethnic syndicates'.

For Third World (cf Asian, Latin American and Black) hermeneuts, the starting point of biblical interpretation is not theories or concepts about Scripture, but a praxiological commitment to redress poverty and the oppressive status of both women and Blacks. 'The experience of and the concerns of the poor, women and blacks become the privileged hermeneutical focus' (Sugirtharajah 1991a:438). For these Bible interpreters, the goal of interpretation is not primarily solving intellectual queries but transforming society. Liberation is seen as the goal of hermeneutics.

In the following lines, I intend revealing my own text theory. I align myself with Gerrie Snyman (1995a:205) who postulates that we live in a world of texts; a world in which texts are worshipped. According to Broich and Pfister (1985:13; cf Snyman 1995a:205), a text does not only refer to signs on paper, because the notion of text can include all discursive texts and everyday chatter, in a nutshell, all cultural systems and structures. My understanding of text therefore, is not limited to the traditional understanding of a text as that which had to be recovered through textual criticism. Hence some of the basic texts embarked on in the present research include feminism, the biblical text and an (African) woman's liberation framework.

Like many feminist biblical scholars, I find the idea of the Bible as the infallible Word of God problematic. I also align myself with some Third World theologians (Banana 1993, Pui Lan 1993), who maintain that the revelation of God is not limited to the Bible.

However, I would not agree with people (cf Banana 1993, Stanton 1898) who maintain that the Bible must be rewritten. I would agree with the many biblical scholars (cf Verstraelen 1993; Mukonyora 1993, some of the respondents to Banana's thesis of rewriting the Bible), that it is not necessary to create a new Bible, as the latter will still be a human document and may never be immune to mistakes. What is necessary is to reinterpret the Bible; to address the needs of the recipients of the new contexts. In that way, the Bible story remains alive and the 'pretence of permanence of canon' (cf Snyman 1995a:250) is revealed. In this regard, the argument of Bird (1994a:84) makes sense: Our conversation with the ancient text must reflect the changing circumstances of our world, while simultaneously honouring the integrity of the ancient speakers. She furthermore argues that the Bible can retain authority for her only to the extent in which it is confirmed in her own experience : 'Ultimately the Bible's authority rests on the ability to reveal its Author in a way that enables us to recognise Her in our own day. Only as it directs our attention from itself to the living God may we proclaim it as "the Word of God"' (Bird 1994a:87).

A pertinent question for the present discussion is: What is the researcher's view about the Bible and its authority?

For me the Bible is God's revelation to the people of biblical times. The Israelites for example, understood that they had to take the words (commandments) of their God seriously as they were revealed through God's servants. The words were therefore normative for their lives.

As a Christian African woman living in twentieth century South Africa, I find the words of this ancient book valuable for my life and the lives of many fellow African sisters. Its message about the God whose ways and thoughts are not similar to those of mortals, humbles and also challenges me for I find such a message confirmed in our everyday lives. For example, the God proclaimed in the Bible identifies with those whom humanity despises - women, the physically challenged (cf Jesus' miraculous healings), Blacks and



the poor to name but a few. The Christ proclaimed in the Bible gives life. The latter is manifested in my experiences of the power that the resurrected Christ still gives believers (including African women) to cast out demons (like demons of witchcraft), to heal the sick and to save the lost. Hence the value I attach to the Bible. The Bible therefore has authority in my life in so far as it proclaims life, abundant life. This life includes, amongst others, righteousness, love, justice, peace and obedience.

This rosy picture I have given about the Bible does not, however, imply that the Bible is an innocent book. It does have elements that alienate some people like women, the poor and dwellers in rural areas. Such elements reveal its ideological nature because the Bible is a human book. As I have argued, it is the responsibility of the hermeneut to spot such elements and reject them for they will not be in line with the words of life which the Bible proclaims. For the present researcher, the Bible is both oppressive and liberative. What would be beneficial, would be to look for relevant ways by which to render the Bible message relevant to Bible readers in twentieth century post-apartheid South Africa. I thus align myself with Bird (1994b:336) when she argues:

The authority of the Bible, as written word, is an authority of communication; it depends on understanding. The Bible may function for some as a holy object or source of power, but its authority derives from its ability to instruct, convict, and inspire. When its message is no longer comprehended, or when its word is heard as false or irrelevant, its authority is jeopardized, or annulled ... Continued affirmation of the Bible's authority requires new ways of interpreting the text and appropriating its message. And they must be capable of recognizing the offence in the text while affirming its truth and power.

## **F. CHAPTER DIVISION**

Chapter One introduces the main question of this research. A preliminary hypothesis is also postulated. Moreover, I state the reason for undertaking this study, and also outline the various methods I use in investigating the main aspects of this research.

Chapter Two focuses on the various frameworks within which the Bible is read from the perspective of the liberation of women. The mainline one, which in this research is the United States White feminist framework, serves as the point of departure as well as the basis of this thesis. In order to locate the South African women's liberation framework within Africa, I also intend giving an overview of an African biblical feminist framework. To conclude this section, the social context in which a Northern Sotho woman finds herself is portrayed, simultaneously highlighting various oppressive elements shaping her life. Biblical feminist readings by Black South African women are also reflected. Each of these three feminist hermeneutic frameworks is concluded with an evaluation.

Chapter Three, focuses on the text of Proverbs 31:10-31. Socio-political approaches are as far as possible used to trace the social situation that produced this text, while a historical-critical study helps to reveal amongst others, the date of the text, its audience, as well as the purpose for its writing. Exegesis of this text, for a change, is done from a feminist perspective.

Chapter Four, introduces a new woman's liberationist approach to the reading of the Bible in an African context of South Africa - a *Bosadi* approach. This approach is then used to investigate or re-read Proverbs 31:10-31.

Chapter Five, concludes the thesis by revisiting the question of the Bible, women and context.

## **G. END NOTES**

1. This notion of Blackness being identified with evil became clear in one of my conversations with a White colleague. She indicated that in the White culture, darkness (cf the night which is dark versus the day) is associated with bad mystique, with danger, negativity and evil. A black goat among the goats is viewed as a bad one (Blackie). Black magic versus White magic is regarded as evil. Black is also seen as a colour signifying sorrow, mourning (cf death cases) - conversation with E Miescher, 05/05/1995 - Evanston.
2. This argument also became apparent in Dr R R Ruether's lecture (1995a) on 'South Africa: Sign of hope in a polarized world?' It was noted that the Afrikaners, with their State Theology, rooted in the Calvinistic notion of predestination, oppressed the majority of Black people in the country.
3. For a while I prefer to call my framework/discourse : women's liberation/ liberation of women rather than feminist or womanist. Though I realise that the experiences of womanists have significant resemblances with those of Black South African women, I am still hesitant at this stage to use the term womanism in relation to the context of my study. I therefore hope to be able to coin a new term as the discussion of this research develops.

## CHAPTER 2

### READING THE BIBLE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN

#### A. INTRODUCTION

The present research focuses on biblical hermeneutics from the stance or perspective of women's emancipation<sup>1</sup>/liberation. Some would call it a feminist perspective on the Bible which is the most popular term. Feminism, in a broader sense, has been defined in various ways. Ramazanoglu (1989:8-9) lists some characteristics of various versions of feminism. A few, which have a bearing on the present research, are noteworthy:

- a. All versions of feminism hold that the existing relations between the sexes in which women are subordinated to men, are not satisfactory and ought to be changed.
- b. In feminism, the whole history and future course of human society is questioned.
- c. Feminism aims at changing the world, transforming the relations between women and men so that *all* people can have a more equal chance of fulfilling their human potential.
- d. Feminism implies a radical critique of reason, science and social theory raising serious questions about how we know what we think we know. This characteristic is also echoed in the ensuing definition of feminism by Ackermann et al (1992:xvi): '... a radically transformed perspective which questions our social, cultural, political and religious traditions and calls for structural change in all these spheres. It attempts a critique of the oppressive structures of society'. However, the radicality of that critique, the possibility of male feminists and the resultant feminist praxis are areas in which there is considerable difference of opinion. Worthy to be noted is the fact that the way these issues are constructed by an

individual feminist, moreover, have an effect on the hermeneutical perspective she/he adopts (cf Tolbert 1983:115).

Having commented on the concept feminism/feminist, a further question arises: What is 'feminist hermeneutics'? This term needs clarification. Hermeneutics is the process of conscious reflection on how interpretation is done and by whom it is done (Camp 1993:154). Hermeneutics means 'understanding', 'interpretation'. Though the term is mainly used with reference to the interpretation of texts, there is a sense in which we act hermeneutically in a variety of ways in our lives.

There are usually three ways of interpreting the text:

- a. To interpret the text experientially;
- b. To bring to the text presuppositions from our life contexts;
- c. To reshape or enlarge the text's meaning as a result of our interpretation.

In contrast, Ackermann et al (1992:xvii) regard hermeneutics as a process of interpreting and understanding while Tolbert (1983:119) defines feminist hermeneutics '... as a reading of a text (or the writing of an analysis, or the reconstructing of history) in the light of oppressive structures of patriarchal society'.

The definition, and explanation of the terms 'feminism' or 'feminist' as given above, appear to be restricted to those who see sexism as a form of injustice used by societies to subordinate women. Such a perspective will approach the Bible (a product of patriarchal cultures) with a hermeneutics of suspicion to unmask its androcentric bias. Such a perspective, it is claimed is often embraced by White middle-class women. In chapter one, as noted, I mentioned that there are various feminist hermeneutic frameworks. Among these are the Asian, African-American, Hispanic and African. Sakenfeld's (1988:5-4) remark with regard to a feminist perspective, the Bible and theology, appears

to be of relevance to these feminist frameworks. She argues that there is no single feminist perspective on the Bible and theology (cf also Bird 1994a:21). According to her, a feminist, in the broader sense of the word, is one who seeks justice and equality for all people and who is particularly concerned with the fate of women - all women - in the midst of 'all people'. Such a definition means that issues relating to racism, classism and ecology, as well as peacemaking, form part of the scope of feminism. Schüssler-Fiorenza (1992:8) seems to have a fairly similar view. She argues: '... feminist biblical interpretation must place at the centre of its attention *every woman's* struggles to transform patriarchal structures, both in biblical times and in our own, rather than focusing only on the *androcentric* biblical text and its authority' (my emphasis). My understanding of the words 'every woman' would be women of all colours, cultures and classes. Such women, in their different struggles against racism, classism, and colonialism amongst others, must read the Bible with more suspicion than the mainline feminists, namely White Euro-American women. Rather than focusing only on the gender struggle in the text, they may interrogate the text further by posing questions like: Which class of people 'produced' this text? How did colonists interpret this text for us? How can the text make sense if read from the perspective of say, an African culture (which has been demonised by colonial imperialists)?

It is beyond the scope of this research to cover all feminist hermeneutic frameworks. I intend giving a brief survey of some of them with a view to locating a South African woman's liberation perspective within them. My point of departure in this chapter will therefore be to survey feminist biblical hermeneutics in the context of the White United States women. In this research the White Women's hermeneutics in the United States is cited as an example of mainline feminist frameworks for the following reasons:

- a. According to Bird (1994a:21), the context of the women's movement as it developed in the nineteenth century North America, is the context in which most

feminists in the English-speaking world were formed, a context in which they formulated their positions.

- b. Bird(1994a:21) further argues that North American feminists have been an important influencing factor on the women's movements emerging in different parts of the world today, searching for their own voice, vision and programme in the light of their specific conditions of oppression as well as within the constraint of their particular cultural resources.
- c. The literature that has shaped my own 'feminist' hermeneutic perspectives so far, has been written mostly by North American White feminists, and part of my present research has also been guided by one of them.

Having accounted for my fundamental stance, I now turn to Mainline Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics.

## **B. A SURVEY OF MAINLINE (NORTH AMERICAN) FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS**

### **1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

For more than three and a half centuries, the Christian faith and its sacred book, the Bible, have shaped the lives of American women. The Scriptures were researched to give insight into the nature of womanhood, because it was hoped that these Scriptures would provide God's revelation concerning women, their duties and their proper sphere in life: 'It was both appropriate and inevitable for Americans, a Bible reading people, to refer to the Scriptures for definitions of female and male, ideals of woman- and manhood, and models of activity befitting Christian women and men' (De Swarte Gifford 1985:11).

Such a state of affairs seems to indicate the vast degree of the authoritative power of the Bible on the lives of these people. However, towards the late eighteenth and the early

nineteenth century, a small but growing number of women and men began to reflect on the biblical notion of womanhood. They increasingly started questioning whether traditional biblical interpretations of the nature of woman did justice to God or to woman as part of God's creation. The debate over the biblical understanding of womanhood continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 'Wherever that debate has been carried on ... the argument has been essentially over the same basic issue: hermeneutics. How shall the Scriptures be interpreted and who shall interpret them?' (De Swarte Gifford 1985:11).<sup>2</sup>

These same questions have often been raised with regard to 'the woman question' and have been answered differently by various segments of the American society (De Swarte Gifford 1985:11).

As argued previously, the Bible appears to have been, and is still, viewed as an important document among American Christians. In this regard Osiek (1985:93) remarks:

... the very fact that we spend so much time and energy wrestling with biblical texts and traditions, the very fact that there is such a thing as 'biblical scholarship', means whether we care to acknowledge it or not that the Bible is more for us than a curious piece of history. It is part of our *own* living history, a power to be reckoned with in the communities of faith to which we belong or from which our students and friends come [Osiek's Italics].<sup>3</sup>

In her study of feminist perspectives on the Bible and theology, Sakenfeld (1988:6-18) discusses some of the key issues which are common in feminist biblical discourses:

- a. the place of experience in coming to grips with Scriptures,
- b. ways of using the Bible in feminist theologies,
- c. special problems of method in feminist biblical scholarship, and
- d. language about God.



Though these issues do not exhaust the whole subject, they will hopefully shed some insight on mainline feminist hermeneutics. I thus intend paying attention to each of these areas with particular emphasis on the ways used by feminist theologians and feminist biblical scholars to read the Bible. The latter emphasis will hopefully help us to obtain a general picture of mainline feminist biblical hermeneutics - the main objective of the present chapter.

## 2. SOME COMMON KEY ELEMENTS IN FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

### a. *The place of experience in coming to grips with Scripture*

Feminists commonly recognise that the Bible as a book was written in and emerged from patriarchal cultures. They further hold that the Bible had been interpreted by generations of church leaders who were also part of those cultures (Sakenfeld 1988:6; Schüssler-Fiorenza 1992:35; Schneiders 1989:4; Exum 1993:11). Thus, for those feminists who wish to retain the Bible as a source for religious identity, the question of what to do with the patriarchal or patriarchally interpreted book is basic to the formation of a theological method. Mary-Ann Tolbert (1990:12) argues that Jewish and Christian feminists whose religious formation has been permeated by the Scriptures are faced with a difficult dilemma: to be honest and to survive as whole human beings calls for denouncing the pervasive patriarchal hierarchies of oppression scattered throughout the Bible while acknowledging the degree to which they have been shaped and continue to be nourished by the Bible. Sakenfeld (1988:6-7) maintains that the central issue around which feminist discussion of approaches to biblical authority revolves, is the place of the *experiences* of women (and the proper definition of this term) in appropriating the witness of the Bible. She regards Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza as representative of the perspective that experience should be given a pivotal place in understanding what is authoritative in

Scripture. Schüssler-Fiorenza argues that the locus or place of divine revelation and grace is not the Bible or the tradition of a patriarchal church, but that it is the ekklesia of women<sup>4</sup> and the lives of women who live the 'option for our women selves'. She further maintains: 'It is not simply "the experience" of women but the experience of women (and all those oppressed) struggling for liberation from patriarchal oppression' (1985:128).<sup>5</sup> For Fiorenza (cf Sakenfeld 1988:7), the context of feminist struggle to overcome oppression provides the experience through which biblical texts may be evaluated. However, for many other feminists, the proposal of any other criterion external to the Bible itself remains untenable. In this regard, Sakenfeld cites members of the evangelical wing of American Protestantism whose views according to her, represent the opposite end of the spectrum. For example, some strongly criticise Schüssler-Fiorenza while most wonder how Scripture itself can be the adjudicator of debates between competing interpreters. L D Scanzoni (1986) and N A Hardesty (1986), who proclaim to be 'evangelical' in the sense of their commitment to the authority of the Scripture, and their belief in the importance of a personal relationship with Christ, suggest that Scripture rather than experience should be regarded as the first source of theology though they also believe that the other three parts of the Methodist 'quadrilateral' (tradition, experience and reason) must always be employed in biblical interpretation. For these writers, experience is not defined in terms of a struggle for liberation (cf Fiorenza's definition). They view it as a personal religious one as well as the experience of people they know (Sakenfeld 1988:8).

Sakenfeld regards Letty Russell's approach as 'middle ground'. For Russell (1985) authority is legitimated power. She (1985:138) maintains : 'The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ'.<sup>6</sup> For her personally, the Bible evokes consent through the power of God's Spirit despite its many sexist, racist and triumphalist texts whose viewpoint, she believes, must be rejected. A paradox is thus experienced in Protestant circles.<sup>7</sup> Commenting on the significance of the Bible in Protestant circles,

Bird (1994a:70) argues: 'For Protestants, however, the Bible is not only an historical source; it is a means of communication with God, a mediator of divine word to contemporary believers, a source of present contact with the living Word - available to all believers'. The paradox between 'the Bible as enslaver liberator' - to use Tolbert's (1983:126) words - necessitates a shift in the paradigm of authority, from the traditional paradigm of authority as domination, to a new paradigm of authority as partnership. Russell (1985), in turn, suggests that feminists should appeal to the authority of the future (since the past has been patriarchally orientated), a biblical vision of God for a mended creation (Sakenfeld 1988:9).

These debates clearly show the difficulty of defining feminist biblical hermeneutics. The variety of feminist perspectives testify to, amongst others, the different religious traditions that have influenced these various biblical feminist scholars.<sup>8</sup> To conclude: There is no single feminist perspective as Sakenfeld (1988:5) has indicated. Having come to this conclusion, I now intend to focus on the various ways used by feminists in their theological discourses or interpretative endeavours.

## b. *Feminists and the Bible*<sup>9</sup>

### i. *Different conceptions*

Sakenfeld (1985:55) argues that Christian feminists who, like the biblical prophets, intend to work within their religious heritage should address the question of the authority of the Bible in the life of their community of faith. In studying any biblical texts, feminists need to be watchful not only for the existence of an explicit patriarchal bias but also for evidence of a more subtle androcentrism in the world view of the authors of the Bible. Commenting on the Bible as an androcentric text, Schneiders (1989:4) contends:

There can no longer be any doubt that the Bible is androcentric, i.e., male centred. It was written largely if not exclusively by men, for men and generally about men in language which, when it does not demonize women, usually marginalizes them or renders them invisible.

Sakenfeld (1985:56) notes that such a frank, and sometimes painful, assessment of the depth of the patriarchal perspective in the text furnishes us with an honest point of departure for considering how this tradition can have contemporary authority for us. Noting the patriarchal nature of the biblical witness, Christian feminists approach the text with at least one of the following three conceptions:

- i. Looking to texts about women to counteract famous texts used 'against' women.
- ii. Looking at the Bible in general (not specifically at texts about women) for a theological perspective offering a critique of patriarchy (some may call this a liberative perspective).
- iii. Looking at texts about women to learn from the interaction of history and stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures.

According to Sakenfeld (1985:56) these approaches are not the only possibilities but rather major categories that can be identified in current biblical interpretation. Though the present material was published in 1985, it is still applicable to present Euro-American biblical interpretation.

It is necessary to focus on each of these emphases in order to get an idea of how the Bible is used in mainstream feminist circles.

ii. *Different Options*

*Option 1 : Looking at texts about women to counteract famous texts used against women.*

The Bible has been used in various ways to justify the traditional place of women in most cultures. Texts and traditions that have been used to uphold the status quo include the theme that woman was created after man (Gn 2), was the first to sin (Gn 3), and that women must be submissive to their husbands (Eph 5). Feminism, as a prophetic movement, identifies such texts or their traditional interpretation as being 'against' women. This viewpoint is then followed by a twofold response:

Firstly, an effort is made to reinterpret some of these familiar texts.

Secondly, 'forgotten' or 'lost' texts that portray women in a different light are brought into the discussion (Sakenfeld 1985:57).

A few examples will suffice to prove the validity of this approach. Phyllis Trible's (1978:101) penetrating analysis of Genesis 2:23 is worthy of note:

As ishshah is taken from ish, so ha adam is taken from ha adamah. On the contrary, the creature is given power over the earth so that what is taken from becomes superior to. By strict analogy, then, the line "this shall be called ishshah because from ish was taken this" would mean not the subordination of the woman to the man but rather her superiority to him.

Trible then argues that in the context of the line 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh', the connotation of the superiority of a woman is not an appropriate conclusion. The relationship of this couple is one of equality and mutuality and not one of female superiority, but certainly not one of female subordination.

Another example is that of the discussion of marriage in Ephesians 5. Emphasis in this text is put on the opening theme of mutual subjection in verse 21 (Sakenfeld 1985:55; Ward Gasque 1988:8).

Complementing such a reinterpretation of texts which had in the past been viewed negatively, is a new emphasis on texts which appear to speak positively about women. Galatians 3:28 serves as a frequently used example: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female. For all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (NRSV). A tendency to interpret this text in futuristic terms that prevails amongst some critics is rejected by feminists because they argue that the text obtains in the context in which Paul discusses practical implications of the gospel (for example, the question of circumcision; cf Kretzschmar 1990:43).

Following this trend of interpretation, feminists turn to the many stories of Jesus' relationship with women as recorded in the gospels. Jesus' attitude towards women (in speaking with them as well as in taking them seriously) is viewed as exceptional and even revolutionary for his own time - an attitude which criticises patriarchy both in the early church and today (Sakenfeld 1995:58; Russell 1974:34-35).

In her evaluation of this approach, Sakenfeld (1985:58) argues that its main strength lies in drawing attention to the diversity of biblical testimony about women because it recovers 'forgotten' positive texts and traditions - an argument which shows that the Bible may not be rejected as being merely an instrument of patriarchy.<sup>10</sup> However, there is a potential weakness in the apparent strength of this argument. From this option, it is sometimes assumed that the Bible furnishes us with clear and explicit teaching about the position of women, that this teaching can be found in texts specifically about women and that it can be discovered by cautious exegesis. Yet the reinterpretations of texts used against women have not gained universal acceptance.

Another weakness inherent in this approach is that it purports to choose between texts upholding traditional interpretations and those challenging them. Some interpreters may suggest a principle such as Jesus being given priority over Paul, as well as, for example, eternally valid statements being preferred to those that are culture-bound. Often,

however, a person struggling with this matter views the situation as one in which competing proof-texts are at work (eg Gl 3:28 competing with 1 Tm 2). Each of these two principal areas of limitation points to the basic question about the meaning of biblical authority and the significance of the Bible for Christian faith.

*Option 2 : Looking to the Bible in general for a theological perspective that offers a critique of patriarchy*

This option, unlike the first, does not focus on particular texts as the basis for developing a Christian perspective on the role and position of women. It approaches the Bible, in the hope of recognising the essence of the gospel and from that recognition, to work towards the specificity of women. On a more general level, this option views the Bible as a witness to the incarnate Word of God, Jesus. The central focus in this option is thus the liberating act of God in Jesus. Sakenfeld (1985:59), however, finds this option problematic as she questions its claim, namely, the ability to discern some central witness in the Scripture or some aspect which can be identified as the embodiment of Christianity. Letty Russell (1985) and Rosemary Ruether (1993) are amongst feminists who share this idea. For Russell (1974), for example, God is portrayed as a liberator who acts in history; she therefore believes that a biblical theology of liberation will remain incomplete as long as the oppression of women is not addressed. Likewise, Ruether (1993) believes that the liberating core of the biblical tradition is the promise of redemption for the poor and the oppressed proclaimed by the prophets of old and by Jesus of Nazareth. These feminist scholars are interested in the overall biblical message per se, and not in individual texts about women.

Ruether (1993:24) argues that the prophetic liberating tradition, as a norm through which to criticise the Bible, does not choose a marginal idea in the Bible, but concentrates on

a tradition that can be claimed as fair on the grounds of generally accepted biblical scholarship at its centre.

Sakenfeld (1985:60) sees as a great strength of this approach the fact that it can look beyond the reactive side of feminism as antipatriarchalism and move to or even start from the more positive and constructive side of the feminist emphasis on *shalom*, which refers to the wholeness or salvation in the widest and deepest sense of the word. *Shalom* includes all people, both woman and man, in all conditions of life ignoring differences, such as race, ethnicity, and class. This interpretation makes use of biblical materials accessible to the concerns and quests of other oppressed groups. A basis is thus provided for affirming solidarity with the rest of humanity. Such a framework is evidently likely to appeal to Third World women as this thesis will reveal. However, this option has potential limitations as well in that the gospel, or what may be called its central witness, is too general and for many people, an encounter with the general message of Christianity in the Bible is vague and diffuse compared to an encounter with particular texts (Sakenfeld 1985:60, 61).

Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (1983:14-21; see also Christ 1977:207) points out two other potential limitations of this option. As the first she mentions the risk of concealing patriarchy in the Bible. She argues that rather than drawing an abstract picture of the biblical and prophetic traditions, Ruether should retrieve them in and through a feminist critical analysis. The second limitation that Fiorenza points out, is the possible claim that there is some timeless truth to be identified in Scripture, while all the actual biblical authors and texts do not contain that truth. As a matter of fact, many people using this approach try to peel off the culturally conditioned parts of the Bible in order to find this timeless truth. This option, like the first, also raises a question about the ultimate usefulness of the Bible while simultaneously drawing our attention to issues of its authority.



*Option 3 : Looking at texts about women to learn from the histories and stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures*

In this option, unlike in option 1, in which texts about women are classified as for or against women, all these texts are used to address the condition of women as people, oppressed on the basis of sex and as people yearning for freedom. In this option the Bible is viewed as an instrument through which God shows women their true condition as oppressed people, yet people who are given a vision of a different heaven and earth, and various ways of how to live toward attaining that vision.

Phyllis Trible, one of the exponents of biblical feminism, follows this option. In her *Texts of terror* (1984) she pays close literary attention to narratives portraying women as victims, some of whom, however, find ways to proclaim their personhood. In her interpretation of the story of the rape and murder of an unnamed woman (Jdg 19), as well as of a daughter sacrificed as a human offering due to her father's foolish vow (Jdg 11), she does so in order to recover a neglected history, to remember a past embodied in the present and to pray that these terrors will not happen again. Sakenfeld (1985:62-63) regards this approach as strong because it affords the possibility of facing the pervasive androcentrism of biblical material directly, without excuse or evasion. A limitation of this option, however, is its ignorance of whether texts perpetuating violence and oppression against women are authoritative in that respect. This option also leads us to the problem of questioning the authority of the Biblical text (Sakenfeld 1985:63). Sakenfeld concludes her analysis of feminists' uses of biblical materials by giving another reaction that is experienced in feminists' encounter with the Bible:

*Option 4 : Giving up on the Bible or understanding its authority in a new way*

Whatever option Christian feminists choose, they assume that patriarchy will disappear. If, however, their assumptions prove to be fruitless, they end up by giving up on the Bible

and even denouncing their Christian faith by remarking: 'Why would God let such a book become the church's book?' (Sakenfeld 1985:63). Osiek (1985:97-98) calls such a reaction, a rejectionist alternative. The primary proponent of this alternative is Mary Daly (1973). For her '... the only acceptable hermeneutical principle is that of the remnant of women who leave the insolvable Judeo-Christian legacy perpetrated by men and together form a new post-Christian faith capable of conquering the evil of patriarchy and transcending its negative power' (Osiek 1985:98).

*Option 5 and more: Further feminist responses to the Bible*

Apart from the rejectionist alternative, Osiek (1985:97-107) proposes *four* more ways to solve the problem facing women in Christian communities who have come to recognise that the Bible is a major tool for maintaining the oppression of the patriarchal structure, namely the loyalist, revisionist, sublimationist and liberationist alternative views.

Those who opt for the loyalist alternative, adopt as their foundational premise, the essential validity and goodness of the biblical tradition as the Word of God - a Word which cannot be dismissed under any circumstances.

For the revisionist alternative, the tradition of the Bible is worth preserving. This alternative thus becomes the starting point for many feminist religious thinkers adhering to liberal theologies of revelation who are not willing to abandon the tradition entirely as the rejectionists do.

The sublimationist's basic premise is the otherness of the feminine as reflected in human culture particularly in feminine imagery and symbolism.

The basic premise of liberationist feminism is a radical reinterpretation of biblical eschatology: the reign of God with its redemption is proclaimed as the task and mission of the believer in the present world as well as in the hope of the full realisation of God in the future (see option 2 of Sakenfeld's analysis).

c. *Special problems of methodology in feminist biblical scholarship*

In their grappling with biblical texts as they relate to women, feminists use a range of tools of contemporary critical biblical scholarship. These include, for example, Tribble's work as an example of rhetorical criticism (1984), while Schüssler-Fiorenza (1983) provides the main focus on the historical reconstruction of the earliest Christian communities. Carol Meyers (1988), for instance, concentrates on a study of the archaeological remains and cross-cultural patterns of socio-economic analysis (cf Sakenfeld 1988:11). More examples could be added, but what is noteworthy, however, is the fact that special methodological problems are involved because a significant amount of work revolves on finding facts which androcentric biblical authors did not intend communicating to their audiences. However, much of the recent literature with regard to biblical texts about women seems to offer the reader such information, yet much of it has been produced by non-specialists, people who do not have the technical training required of members belonging to the scholarly guild (Sakenfeld 1988:12).

Historical inquiries, such as those undertaken by Bird (1981; see her proposal of the methodological considerations essential to a new reconstruction of Israelite religion that will take women's role into proper account), Brooten (1985 - setting to the study of women's role in earliest Christianity) and Fiorenza (1983 - reconstruction of early Christian origins) are valuable in that they offer some controls for the interpretation of the texts in their ancient contexts. However, according to Sakenfeld (1988:12-13), the basic question of authority and revelation still stands: does evidence that the women of

the biblical period played a different role from that suggested by the Bible, have any claim of authority? Fiorenza definitely affirms this but for many others, the attitudes and opinions of canonical authors continue to be given significance.

In the same way that there exists no single feminist perspective on the Bible, feminists strongly disagree about the methods most appropriate for biblical hermeneutics and the reconstruction of theology. These methodological differences are, in most cases, reciprocally related to the judgements made concerning the meaning and normative significance of Scripture (Stroup 1988:24).

The language about God is one of the key issues in feminist perspectives on the Bible and theology. We, therefore, now turn to this issue.

i. *Language pertaining to God*

The question of how to speak when referring to the God in whose image male and female are created is extremely difficult, particularly for Christian feminists who are heirs to the Trinitarian formula (see Duck 1991 for more detail). Christian feminists, representing widely different perspectives on experience and biblical authority have begun to deal with this problem by employing biblical images and by eliminating the pronoun 'he' from their speech and from writing about God. Sakenfeld (1988:14) maintains that 'The results of the pronoun elimination are surprisingly smooth English, usually not even noticed by the uninitiated'. Some writers, however, who are not convinced of the fruitfulness of the elimination of the pronoun 'he', contend also that it does not make any difference because of our lifelong conditioning to conceive of 'God' as male. They prefer to add the concept 'she' alongside 'he' to remind the reader that both terms are acceptable as metaphorical speech.

Some critics, such as Ruether (1986), use the term Goddess with a view to combining both the masculine and feminine forms of the word used for the divine. They feel that they are at the same time preserving the Judeo-Christian conception of the divinity as one entity.

Some critics, however, advocate the preservation of much more of the traditional way of referring to God (see Achtemeier 1988).

Any feminist discussion of language about God ultimately veers in the direction of the issue of Bible translation and the highly controversial 'Inclusive Language Lectionary project of the National Council of Churches'. Feminists are generally agreed about the significance of translating human referents into gender-inclusive English (or any other 'modern language'<sup>11</sup>) whenever the original Hebrew or Greek is understood to have included both women and men. This endeavour, in most cases, entails a difficult exegetical study. An even more taxing question is whether and when to let the androcentricism and patriarchy of the ancient text be clearly visible on the one hand, and on whether and when to provide a modern translated text that does not require women to be involved in constant linguistic 'doublethink' in order to hear themselves included in the other (Sakenfeld 1988:16).

Most scholars would agree that patriarchy in Scripture, in other words the focus on men and the masculine language for God, should not be taken for granted, forgotten or ignored. For some scholars, this means that the text should always be allowed to function as a historic text, a document of ancient Israel and the early church without any additions or changes in rendering the original languages. This opinion is held by many scholars who would be quite willing to use the pronoun 'she'<sup>12</sup> for God in their own speaking and writing (Sakenfeld 1988:16-17).

Sharon Ringe (1983) draws our attention to the vision of a transformed creation in Isaiah 11:6-9, the vision in which she finds the criterion of 'no harm', 'they shall not hurt or

destroy in all my holy mountain'. She suggests that if the language used for the translation hurts or destroys, it is not adequate for the expression of what is appropriate to God or to the human vocation, namely the effort to live toward the image in which we were made, the image of God (cf Sakenfeld 1988:17).

To summarise: the above discussion of the theme of an inclusive language for God, similar to the discussion regarding the preceding themes, reveals the existence of a variety of opinions within feminist hermeneutical circles. Feminists are not worried about these differences because they do not wish to lapse into the authoritarianism dictated by the use of patriarchal structures.

One acknowledges the power of language in creating certain stereotypes about certain issues in life. We cannot deny the harm that has already been caused by the use of the male language for God in many Christian communities including my own.

A practical example is worthy of note: As I was discussing this topic with one of my students, he burst out: 'My God is not a woman!' The question is: Is his god a male? I would however suggest that the supernatural God is beyond the description of human language. The fact that God is basically portrayed as a male in the Bible does not make God male. However, due to the power of language/discourse I have already noted above, I would suggest that both male and female metaphors or language about God be used. I thus recommend inclusive language when speaking about God.

Two other significant themes included in feminist biblical and theological discourses, touched on indirectly by Sakenfeld (1985) in the preceding analysis are, firstly, the androcentrism of the Bible and, secondly, a hermeneutics of suspicion (Stroup 1988:24, 25). As these two themes seem to be related, I intend discussing them together under the heading: *Grappling with an androcentric text*. This discussion will simultaneously serve as the conclusion of my discussion on Euro-American feminist biblical hermeneutics.

ii. *Grappling with an androcentric text*

The preceding portrayal of Sakenfeld's views on how feminists use biblical materials, has shown that most feminists agree that the Bible is a document from patriarchal cultures and it is androcentric. Meyers (1988:24-26), however, cautions feminists against the use of the word 'patriarchy' in its relation to the Bible. She argues:

While broadly correct in associating patriarchy with ancient Israel, their (feminists') assessment of patriarchy as a limiting, harsh, enslaving, or oppressive system, or as a fact that is painful to consider, reveals a serious methodological flaw. They are misusing the term patriarchy as a synonym for male dominance or for a system in which male traits are valued over female ones (brackets mine).

With regard to the androcentricity of the Bible, Stroup (1988:24), for example, argues: 'One has only to acknowledge that the Bible was written in thoroughly patriarchal cultures in order to realize that regardless of whether the intention was conscious or unconscious, androcentrism pervades the Bible'.

On the basis of the feminists' assumption that the Bible is wholly or in part written from an androcentric perspective, they approach the Bible with a hermeneutics of suspicion. Such a hermeneutics interrogates the biblical text with questions both about what is said and what is left unsaid in the text. In many cases the silences of the text, (see Fiorenza:1983) may be of as much significance as what is said. Yet even overtly patriarchal texts may provide material which enables us to recover the history, experience and faith of women in the early church (Stroup 1988:25).

One of the problems stemming from the use of the hermeneutics of suspicion by feminists, is that their interpretations of the method of this hermeneutics are often limited to the scope of their suspicion. According to Stroup (1988:25), the reason for this

limitation of scope may be ascribed to their perception that their 'enemy' has been so clearly identified as androcentrism and patriarchy. As a result, these feminists tend to think that their own motives and assumptions are exempted from scrutiny. Rosemary Ruether (1993:20) calls upon feminists to apply the notion of self-examination and scrutiny when she urges women to criticise humanocentrism, that is, making human beings the norm and crown of creation in a way that diminishes the other beings who also form part of the community of creation.

By way of concluding this section, I would like to make a few remarks on how I evaluate mainstream feminist biblical hermeneutics on the basis of what I have presented in the preceding section.

d. *Review and Evaluation*

i. *Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology*

It is impossible to speak in terms of one mainline, single, feminist biblical hermeneutics. Various feminists from differing backgrounds (in particular ecclesiastical ones) interact with the Bible in various ways. For example, Protestant feminists (cf Tolbert 1983; Bird 1994a) may be more cautious than Roman Catholic feminists when handling the issue of the authority of the Bible. The Roman Catholic feminist Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (1983) for example, sees the woman church, and not the Bible, as the most important aspect in feminist interpretive endeavours. This statement may be ascribed to the emphasis feminists place on the role of the readers in the interpretation of texts. They, therefore, argue that there is no value-free interpretation.

Such a variety in viewpoints with regard to the practice of theology and biblical interpretation, makes the task of evaluating the feminist approaches to the Bible and theology almost impossible (cf Achtemeier 1988:45).



ii. *Definition or understanding of patriarchy*

Although not explicitly and directly stated, it has been implied that feminists perceive of the Bible as an androcentric document stemming from patriarchal cultures. These feminists mostly interpret patriarchy in terms of gender asymmetry. Aspects such as racism, classism, and colonialism, which may form key elements of other feminist frameworks like the African-American or Black South African, for example, are not dealt with. If they are taken into consideration they are dealt with within the wider framework of patriarchy, namely as depicting gender asymmetry (cf Ruether 1993 and Russell 1985). I therefore agree with Meyers (1988:26) that 'feminists' judgemental response to biblical patriarchy unfairly uses contemporary feminist standards (which hope for an elimination of sexist tradition by seeking to promulgate equality between the sexes) to measure the culture pattern of an ancient society which was struggling to establish its viability under circumstances radically different from contemporary Western conditions'.

Though it is not always possible to fathom the intentions of the original authors, historical-critical studies have shown that it is possible to do some justice to the biblical text by considering amongst others, its *Sitz im Leben*. While it cannot be denied that the Bible is androcentric and patriarchal, Meyers (1988) warns us to be cautious in our use of terminology.

iii. *Is the Bible as an androcentric document redeemable?*

Many of these feminists, particularly those who grew up in the Protestant tradition, would support the view that the Bible is redeemable as an androcentric document. They are thus able to reconcile, to use Tolbert's (1983:113-126) terminology 'the same Bible as enslaver and liberator'. There are, however, a small number of them, for instance Mary Daly, who reject the Bible as being irredeemable, even going to the extent of rejecting the whole Christian tradition. One factor which seems to keep them tied to the Bible is the belief

amongst some of them that the Bible, or the God proclaimed in it, gives them life. The words of Achtemeier (1988:51) may be significant in this regard:

But the church has not only determined the canon; the canon has also determined the church. The stories, traditions, announcements now contained in the Scriptures are those words that have created the church. Apart from those events mediated to us by the Scriptures, the church never would have come into being; and apart from those events the church's life as Christian church cannot be sustained. *It is the biblical story, illumined in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (a working that the feminists rarely discuss, incidentally) that makes us Christians(my emphasis).*

It is uncertain to me whether other reasons, like the fear of venturing into the unknown as well as the fear of marginalisation, could be among the motivating factors. Despite the vehement attack of some of these feminists on the androcentricity and patriarchal nature of the Bible, they still conduct their feminist discourses within or around the Bible.

#### iv. *The notion of interpretation as value-free*

At this stage of the current study it is important to pay attention to the idea of value-free Bible interpretation. Feminists do not conceal their stance of advocacy as they believe that there cannot be any neutral interpretation. In this regard, Thiselton (1992:431) argues:

Feminist hermeneutics embodies a deep hermeneutic of suspicion that the conventional constructions of the history of biblical interpretation *do not represent value-neutral* descriptions of biblical history, traditions and texts. All interpretation, it is argued, at least until very recently, has been mediated through male-dominated reading-communities[Thiselton's italics].

Criticising historical-critical scholarship for having failed to meet the demands of objectivity as they propound, feminists emphasise the importance of the interpreter's own

biases in shaping the resultant interpretation (Tolbert 1983:114). The words of Brueggemann (1993:9) seem to echo the preceding feminist stance:

We are now able to see that what has passed by as objective, universal knowledge has in fact been the interested claim of the dominant voices who were able to pose their view and to gain either assent or docile acceptance from those whose interest the claim did not serve. *Objectivity is in fact one more practice of ideology that presents interest in covert form as an established fact* (my emphasis).

We can neither deny the importance of the role of readers in the production of the text, nor can we nullify the results of historical-critical studies on the importance of locating the text within its original setting. Therefore, I would suggest that there should be a measure of control regarding the biases we, as readers, bring to the text. If we are to read what we want to read in the text, why should we bother ourselves with a scientific study of the text? Achtemeier's (1988:50-51) feminist critique is worthy of note: '... by making their own experience the authoritative judge of what is or what is not the Word of God, the feminists have taken a position fraught with problems. They bring fully as much bias to the biblical text as does any male'. Such biases could be controlled by, amongst others, our employment of critical theories in our hermeneutic endeavours. Habermas' 'theory of communicative action', for example, suggests that there should be no coercion between partners involved in communication. Approaching such theories with caution may help reduce the subjectivity of readers of the Bible. This, however, should not imply that there is any interpretation that is totally value-free.

In conclusion: it is important to note that mainline feminist biblical scholarship has made, and it is still making, a very significant contribution to Biblical Studies and Theology in general, namely:

*Firstly*, making readers (particularly Bible readers) conscious of the significance of gender issues. In this way, the female gender that has been forgotten, marginalised and

silenced becomes foregrounded. Foregrounding should not be taken to mean the oppression of the oppressor by the oppressed. This state of affairs cannot be accommodated in any academic paradigm, for if any part of humanity is oppressed, the whole of humanity is also oppressed (cf Ruether 1985:116). We must also be careful not to overemphasise the feminine gender at the expense of the male one lest we revert to socio-pragmatism. Socio-pragmatic hermeneutics is one which on the basis only of narrative-experience within a given context, excludes all interpretative options in advance which would reject any signals other than positive ones for the journey which has already been undertaken (Thiselton 1992:440). Feminists have employed their scholarship to shed light on the leadership and roles that females exercised among God's people in both the Old and the New Testaments (Achtemeier 1988:48).

*Secondly*, feminists have also brought to light the ideological nature of biblical texts (cf also Carrol 1993; Brueggemann 1993) and the need for employing critical methods in our hermeneutical endeavours. Through their efforts we have come to realise the political nature of knowledge (including the biblical material) and how language can serve as a tool to maintain the status quo.

*Thirdly*, they have also highlighted this significant aspect of biblical interpretation: There is no value free interpretation of the Bible. Such a statement, as we noted previously, shows the role of the readers' biases in any hermeneutical endeavour.

*Lastly*, feminists have shown that though the Bible contains texts that alienate women, it does have a liberative message for all oppressed persons, in particular for women.

Having briefly discussed what mainline feminist biblical hermeneutics propagates, I now turn to one of the many hermeneutic frameworks which have emerged from mainstream feminism, namely African feminism.

### **C. AFRICAN FEMINIST READINGS OF THE BIBLE**

This section of the work will focus on women on the African continent who are engaged in issues centering on women's liberation as they relate to the Bible or theology. I have chosen an African hermeneutic framework in order to locate a Black South African biblical hermeneutics within it to the degree that such an endeavour is possible.

Okure (1993:167) contends: 'African women theologians, to my knowledge, have not coined a terminology for their own interpretive efforts. They freely use the term feminist but give it their own particular content ...' At a session conducted by African women who were highlighting women's liberation issues from the point of view of Literature and Literary Studies at North Western University (Program of African Studies), which I attended, the term African feminism was frequently used.

Due to the history of Africa, a history of poverty and ideological domination in both intra- and international spheres, Africans cannot as yet boast of many 'professionally' trained female biblical scholars (cf Pala 1994:209-210; Okure 1993:77). As a result of this lack, their field has not yet been specified. For example, theologians and biblical scholars work side by side. Their works, however, reveal three themes which may help in establishing a general picture of how they deal with the Bible or the Judeo-Christian tradition in their lives: Firstly, a critique of African culture and received Christianity, secondly, African women's Christology and thirdly, how African women use the Bible. Though I am aware that Christology as a theme may sound misplaced in the present research, I think that in order to get an overall picture of African feminist biblical interpretation, this theme must of necessity feature, for it is one of the basic themes of African feminist hermeneutic frameworks. This theme also becomes notable in South African feminist hermeneutics as this study will reveal. The ensuing section will focus on each of these themes to reveal a picture of the nature of African feminist biblical hermeneutics.

## 1. A CRITIQUE OF AFRICAN CULTURE AND RECEIVED CHRISTIANITY

African women who are engaged in theology from the perspective of women's liberation, such as Oduyoye 1994; Kanyoro 1992; Amoah 1989, criticise African culture with its patriarchal inclinations. These women differ from Black women such as Rivkin (1994), Steady (1994) who tend to blame European imperialism as a cause of African patriarchy. The former group tend to view African culture as one of the stumbling blocks on their way to self-identity as worthy human beings, independent of men. I align myself with these women in postulating that even before the coming of the Whites with their colonial imperialistic policies, the African culture was patriarchal. Oduyoye (1994:173) says: '... it is too easy to lay the blame solely at the feet of westernization. We know that in the African religio-cultural heritage is to be found the seeds of objectification and marginalization of women. Colonial policies simply helped the process along, and it succeeded to the extent that it was advantageous for African men'.

The African religio-cultural heritage with its emphasis on rituals involving birth, marriage, death and mourning put women in a disadvantaged position in most cases. This heritage is used by society to perpetuate the subordination of women to men (cf Oduyoye & Kanyoro 1992:9-73). Oduyoye (1992:19) argues: 'Through its provisions for ritual, religion operates in the human community as a determiner of power, influence, domination, and oppression'.

Most of the rituals result in the African woman finding herself in a predicament. According to the African culture, she is usually viewed as a mother, and thus valued as life-giver, because through giving birth the continuity of the race is ensured. However, religion appears to have developed a tendency of assigning 'unholiness' to giving birth requiring that a woman be purified after it. Moreover, this view has been perpetuated by the Christian religion. One of the arguments against the ordination of women into the ministry is that women give birth and that this somehow precludes them from being

ordained. A feminist perspective on religion (both on traditional African religions and on Christianity) thus becomes necessary to correct this state of affairs.

Apart from criticising African culture as a stumbling block towards the liberation of women, this group of African feminist theologians seem to be dissatisfied with the way in which Christianity was introduced to them. According to Hinga (1992:187) an imperial Christianity had an imperial Christ to match. Christ was viewed as the conqueror. As a result, new territories, both physical and spiritual, would be fought for, annexed and subjugated in the name of Jesus the warrior. In most cases, the conquest of Africa by missionaries implied an eradication of what was highly esteemed by Africans. The missionaries, in the name of Christ, wanted to create a spiritual and cultural *tabula rasa* on which a 'new' culture, a new spirituality could be inscribed. The cultural and spiritual imperialism of the missionaries had serious consequences. The lives of the African women were also subjected to this cultural and spiritual imperialism. In this regard Hinga (1992:188) comments: '... in their unilateral decision to stamp out what they decided to be a barbaric African custom, they ended up causing the women involved to suffer tremendously'. One example will suffice: in cases of polygyny, a polygynist who wished to be baptised, was advised to retain one wife and abandon all the others (Hinga 1992:188). In a society where women were defined in terms of marriage, that is, in terms of their close identity with a male figure, such a decision had far reaching consequences for girls.

Apart from the negative image of Christ that the missionaries presented to Africans, there was an apparently positive one. They established mission stations which often served as centres of refuge. Education was also used as a strategy for proselytisation. Moreover, women perceived these 'emancipatory impulses' of the new religion and embraced them. It can thus be noted that the missionary praxis expressed two images of Christ to the Africans: Christ seen as the conqueror who appeared to legitimise the subjugation of whole races and Christ seen as the liberator, glimpses of which vision could be gleaned

from some of the charity work missionaries were doing for the African people. Hinga thus notes that the Christ of the missionary enterprise was an ambivalent one. This made it necessary for African women to formulate their own Christology, a Christology that would make sense to them.

It is thus clear that the African religio-cultural heritage with its bias against women, as well as the received Judeo-Christian tradition, with its apparent bias against the African race and the African women, need to be reinterpreted by African women in order to make some refreshing and empowering sense for them. African women feminist theologians keep on noting that it is the responsibility of African women themselves to arise out of their subordination, silence and marginalisation.<sup>13</sup>

One of the themes that is notable in African feminist theology is the perception that African women have about the Christ of the Christian Bible. This, therefore, leads us to the discussion of African women's Christology.

## 2. CHRISTOLOGY FROM AN AFRICAN FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is imperative that the African woman should define her stance in relation to the life-giving Christ of the Bible, because she is at the bottom of the ladder in being oppressed by her African brother, oppressed by other women who are not Africans, as well as non-African men. 'Especially when the hierarchical scale on the international level is taken into account, the African woman is at the very bottom of that scale. She incarnates the mass of the poor and the oppressed' (Tappa 1989:33).<sup>14</sup>

As noted in the previous section, the portrait of Christ presented to Africans by the missionaries was ambivalent. As they became 'enlightened', Africans were able to read the Bible and gained access to various images of Christ in the New Testament. Christ is



often viewed as one who identifies with the weak. Christ's life was marked, amongst others, by weakness: his birth place - a manger, (Lk 2:6-7), his parents' offering - a pair of turtle doves (Lk 2:22-24). In addition, he came from Nazareth, a city in the despised North of Palestine. According to Souga (1989:28), by these situations of weakness, Jesus encapsulates in his person the condition of the weak and hence, the condition of women. In this identity as God-man, Christ mirrors the condition of the African woman.

There is a popular conception among Africans of Jesus Christ as the personal saviour and personal friend of those who have faith in him. As a servant, he died for us to save us from death. The image of Christ as a personal friend has been extremely popular among women, precisely because they are the ones who direly need such a personal friend (Hinga 1992:190-191).

Another popular image of Christ is that Jesus is seen by Africans as embodying the Spirit, the power of God. He dispenses the same Spirit to his followers. This image is especially popular in African Independent Churches. The patrons of these churches are by and large women.

Another image of Christ gleaned from the New Testament by Africans is that of Christ as an iconoclastic prophet. He stands in Scripture as a critic of the status quo, especially when it engenders social injustices and the marginalisation of some in society (Hinga 1992:191). African women are particularly impressed by Jesus' revolutionary attitude towards women during his time (cf Tappa 1989:32-33). Amoah & Oduyoye (1989:44) hold:

**In Christ all things hold together. The integrity of a woman (a person) as born into a particular culture, and yet belonging to a community of believers, is ensured .... The Christ has held body/soul together by denouncing oppressive religious practices that ignored well-being. It is this Christ who has become for us, for African women and for Africa, the saviour and liberator of the world.**

One would argue that, this powerful or living Christology of African women, is probably one of the forces that have kept them alive (psychologically, physically, spiritually etc) and still continue to keep them alive amidst their sufferings (poverty, marginalisations etc). We now turn to the theme of how African women read the Bible.

### 3. HOW AFRICAN FEMINISTS USE THE BIBLE

It has previously been mentioned that Africa cannot as yet boast of professionally trained biblical scholars. As I read their works I note that very few of them deal with the biblical text *per se* as it applies to African women's experiences. Biblical texts are however cited in the context of broader issues like African women and the Church, African women and culture to name but two. However, as I went through a few works that seemed to focus mainly on biblical studies, the following points came to light:

#### a. *The authority of the Bible vis-a-vis the experience of women*

The authority of the Bible by African feminist biblical scholars is usually taken for granted. Though they acknowledge the androcentricity of the Bible text (despite the fact that this does not come out as clearly as it does in mainstream feminist hermeneutic frameworks) these scholars view the Bible as the container of God's will. Okure (1989:47) says: 'The Bible as the embodiment of the revealed will of God thus plays a decisive role for Christians in their approach to the women issue today, including in the Third World, to seek to understand correctly what the Bible actually says concerning the divine will for women'.

African feminist interpreters approach the Bible from the viewpoint of the experiences of African women. Though they acknowledge that the Bible, has been used to subordinate women through inappropriate interpretations, their main perception is that

the Bible, which is regarded as normative, can liberate African women if read 'appropriately' - namely from the perspective of African women. For African feminists, therefore, the authority of the Bible seems to be weightier than women's experiences. The latter are mainly highlighted with regard to gender asymmetry as basically defined within the framework of the African culture. Souga (1989:27) reveals this attitude when remarking:

Even a glance at our society leads us to conclude that the lived experience of African women is not always taken into account. Everything is in the hands of men; it is they who have the right to speak, who enjoy respect, who have the right to take initiatives .... Being a woman means silence, being brushed aside, suffering, weakness.

Another factor that should receive attention in reading the works of African feminist theologians is the way in which they approach the Bible.

#### b. *The Bible and African Women*

An application of Sakenfeld's (1985) options on how Euro-American women read the Bible shows that African feminist biblical interpreters tend to use option one (looking at texts about women to counteract famous texts used against women) in their hermeneutical endeavours, as the following examples reveal:

In her article 'Women in the Bible' Teresa Okure (1989:47-59) follows this option. She shows how the story of Eve has been traditionally interpreted to legitimate the subordination of women. She then re-reads it in a way that is empowering to women. For example, she shows that the whole movement of the narrative of the fall imputes greater blame on Adam, a term reserved here exclusively for the man, because he personally received from God the prohibition against the eating of the forbidden fruit (Gn 2:16-17), which caused the climactic punishment with a universal scope. Okure(1989:50-51) furthermore argues that after the fall, Eve became 'the mother of all the living'

(Gn 3:20) in a physical sense, thereby playing a role that is akin to God's in also being the source and giver of life.

In addition to this approach of reinterpreting texts in a light positive to women, African feminist biblical interpreters also like appealing to Jesus and his attitude towards women during his sojourn on earth. His attitude towards women is viewed as revolutionary to the *status quo* of the time. According to the traditions of the time, traditional Orthodox Jews, particularly the rabbis, were not supposed to speak to women in public, Jesus however transcended those traditions.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus is viewed as providing a solution to various problems with which women of his time wrestled (cf Okure 1992:221-223).

To conclude this survey of discussing elements of the approach of the Bible from the perspective of African feminist theology or biblical scholarship, a few comments by way of evaluation will be in order.

#### 4. EVALUATING AFRICAN FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

My evaluation will focus mainly on the works of the few feminist biblical scholars dealt with in this study. An investigation of their works reveals the ensuing important points:

Though they acknowledge the androcentricity of the biblical text, they do not regard it as such a serious issue as do mainline biblical hermeneuts. The positive capacity of the Bible to liberate and thus to empower African women receives more emphasis than its negative capacity to subordinate them.

These women grapple with their experiences, particularly patriarchy, the ways in which it manifests itself in the African religio-cultural heritage and in their daily interaction with fellow African men. This becomes their main object of criticism. Unfortunately, they fail to criticise the effect of the missionaries' imperialistic tendencies regarding Bible interpretation. One would have expected these scholars to criticise this aspect in order to free the received biblical interpretation from the Euro-centric, post-colonial bonds and to formulate an Afrocentric, liberative perspective. This perspective would imply a perspective in which an African woman affirms her self-worth as an African and also as a woman without appendages such as 'civilised' or 'educated' which actually mean being Westernised.

They use an all-embracing term, African, therefore their work is not always relevant to specific areas (eg South Africa). Countries such as South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe still face the problems of classism and racism yet few scholars include these issues in their analysis.

In conclusion, I commend these African feminist theologians for their will to rise out of their condition of oppression and to affirm their understanding of what they essentially are in God's plan. Their contribution to women's perspective on the Bible or on theology helps to neutralise the male biased interpretations of African theology. They reveal the significance of taking gender issues into cognisance. Their critique of the African religio-cultural system with its bias against women is both essential and worthwhile. I, however, have to voice my dissatisfaction with their tendency to demonise African culture. They tend to concentrate only on the negative aspects of our culture. This may be ascribed in part to their Western oriented education. Even though African culture tends to be patriarchal, it also contains positive elements which can contribute towards the liberation of African women. If their voices are heeded, the present odd, degenerate and basically unfair situation in which African women find themselves will improve.

Having given a glimpse of how African feminist theologians approach the Bible, this study will now focus on South African Black feminist readings of the Bible.

## **D. SOUTH AFRICAN BLACK FEMINIST READINGS OF THE BIBLE**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

As the present research is based on the reading of a text of the Bible from a Northern Sotho context, it is imperative to get a fairly representative picture of a Black woman in the South African context. How does this woman read the Bible? In other words, which factors shape her reading of the Bible?

I have opted for a Northern Sotho reading of the Bible as it is the context from which I speak, and despite the fact that the Black women in the country form the vast majority of the country's population, as well as of the Bible reading community, they have had only a few people to speak on their behalf. Until recently, the Bible has been interpreted on their behalf from Western perspectives (in theological discourses) and from male perspectives (in churches). This has resulted in Black women being characterised by invisibility, silence and being 'unknown' (Masenya 1995a:149).

The South African situation, known notoriously for its policy of apartheid, deliberately produced different kinds of human beings. The phrase 'different kinds of human beings', in this sense, refer to different classes. The different classes are the result of the unequal division of the country's resources amongst various races in the country. The injustice of this division is aggravated by the fact that the minority race, namely the Whites, who were foreign to South Africa, took the land from the natives of the land by force. They

even took for themselves the best parts of the land, which contained more natural resources while the remnant of the land was allocated to the other race groups - namely to the Indians (Asiatics), the Coloureds and the Blacks (cf Ramodibe 1989:21).<sup>16</sup> Under such unjust circumstances, the South African Blacks, both men and women, were always given the short end of the stick.

Although the basic situation has changed in a post-apartheid South Africa, the repercussions of the previous evil regimes will have serious effects on the lives of all the people of South Africa, but in particular on Black South African women, who are still at the bottom of the kyriarchal ladder. Despite the fact that political power is basically in the hands of the Blacks at present, the economic power is still in the hands of the previous land owners, the haves, who have benefitted from the former capitalistic system. Black people in South Africa in general, the Black women in particular, still have to grapple with the poverty into which they were purposefully plunged because they were viewed as non-persons, meant to be the slaves of the Whites by the regime of the time. Most Black women will still have to struggle against sexism, to which they have been subjected by almost all sectors of the capitalistic regime namely, the church, African culture, and situations of employment if they happened to have an opportunity to get employment at all (cf Bennett 1986:170-172).

Against this brief account of the background of the South African socio-political scene, I intend investigating factors shaping the life of a Northern Sotho woman, because these factors will definitely influence her to read the Bible from a liberationist perspective. Colonial imperialism- racism, classism, sexism, and the African culture will be discussed as being amongst the most decisive factors that have shaped the attitudes of such oppressed Black women.

Before looking into each of these factors separately, it is necessary to clarify the exact use of terminology with regard to the attempts of women to define their theological

discourses in the light of their experiences as Black women. I refer to the valuable work by Denise Ackermann (et al) 1992. *Women hold up half the Sky : Women in the Church in South Africa*. From the title of this work, one can already predict that the book focuses not only on works by Black women and that the papers included do not only focus on biblical hermeneutics, but cover wider aspects of Religion such as Spirituality and Christian women, Women and the church and, Women and ministry amongst others.

Black women in this book appear to be comfortable with the use of the word feminism or feminist theology as can be seen from the following statements: 'A feminist theology starts with the affirmation that, in Christ, there is a New Human Being, which underlies, supports and promotes female personhood as well as male personhood' (Mncube 1992:358). According to Jordaan (1992:127) Black Feminist Theology does not distance itself from liberatory political tendencies because it emerged from political oppression. Bernadette Mosala (1986:130) explores the uniqueness of Feminist Theology in its use of women's experience. She further argues: 'The use of women's experience in Feminist Theology explodes as a critical force, exposing classical theology - including its codified traditions, based on male experience rather than on universal human experience'. Elsewhere, I have argued that

Black Feminist Theology, I guess, would argue that it is no accident that God created a human being called a woman, a black woman, in God's own image for God's own sovereign purposes (Masenya 1994a:72).

It is thus obvious that, just like their African sisters in the hermeneutic framework discussed previously, Black South African women engaged in the Bible/Theology and gender issues, have not yet coined the necessary terminology in which to voice their concepts - they have simply embraced the terminology of mainstream feminism and appropriated<sup>17</sup> it to their own context. This is perhaps understandable due to the relative youth of this field of investigation. According to Jordaan (1992:126), Black Feminist



Theology got off the ground in 1982 with the birth of the Institute for Contextual Theology. It therefore cannot as yet boast of highly qualified or trained pastors, however, 'Black women in South Africa are involved at grassroots level in the development of a Theology from both their intellectual capacity as well as their inner strength from their gut feelings' (Jordaan 1992:126).

It is encouraging to note that some Black male theologians also see the need for this new Black perspective. This affirmation is in solidarity with their Black sisters in order to fight '... the conflictual character of human history and the reality of confrontations among human beings, be they of class, race, or sex, ....' (Maimela 1986:101-112). These issues raised by Maimela are vital issues which traditional theology avoids. This involvement of a few Black male theologians in women's issues should not however, mislead Black women. Most of these women (cf Bennett 1986; Jordaan 1992; Mncube 1992) realise the need for Black women themselves to take up the challenge of fighting for their own liberation. The words of Mosala (1986:132) reinforce this idea: '... liberation does not fall into one's lap. It must be claimed and protected .... Unless we are willing to exercise our right to claim power and to do something about bringing about the challenges we believe are necessary we will remain the invisible creatures who are always on the outside looking in'.

This broad survey of South African Black feminist theology now leads us to an analysis of various forces that shape the experience of an African woman in this country. ✓

## 2. FACTORS SHAPING BLACK WOMEN'S LIVES IN SOUTH AFRICA

### a. *Colonial Imperialism : Racism*

The lives of Black women in South Africa today still bear the marks of post-colonial imperialism, of which I have already given a glimpse when focusing on the colonial history of South Africa.

According to Mofokeng (1986:113-128), the arrival of armed colonial Europeans in our country determined how our ancestors responded to this incursion: 'Their act of forcing a foreign, capitalist economic system upon our forefathers as well as relegating them to a position of cheap labourers determined the nature of the social, political and economic history of South Africa'. From then onwards, the South African socio-economic history became a prolonged struggle against institutionalised, violent exploitation and oppression as well as a struggle to regain their land, a land on which they could freely establish a new social, political and economic system. Such a system would entail that they could own the means of production and the produce of their labour, a system in which they themselves would determine the way of distribution. These White colonialists established a socio-political system in which a few White South Africans had tremendous power over multitudes of Blacks as well as over all the resources in the country (economic, religious, political and social; cf William 1990:25).

In South Africa it was thus a fortunate occurrence to be born into a White family while it appeared unfortunate to be born Black. Jordaan (1992:123-124) argues:

Being Black is synonymous to being oppressed and exploited. It means to earn less than what is humanly sufficient to eat, to be housed, to be schooled properly .... It is to be faced by a board stating Whites only to a beautiful park, and not to feel your humanness diminished .... It is to be employed in backbreaking low-paid jobs, or to have no job but still having the inborn desire to work .... It is to be uprooted from your dwelling place and to be placed in temporary tents, have your family wiped out by the cold

of the night ... but still have the will to live. It is Being ... Black ... Living.

We were therefore subjugated as people because of the colour of our skins. The worth of a human being was judged not on the basis of her/his humanness but on the basis of her/his race. Any system that the colonialists enforced on Black people (be it religious, educational, economic) was apparently meant to turn them into their slaves.

Such a state of affairs has shaped and will still continue to shape the lives of many South Africans despite the anomaly that in the post-apartheid South Africa it is supposed to belong to history (particularly in the case of the White right wingers). For example, I believe that the fact that Dr Nelson Mandela is the state president of the country has not changed the spirit of White superiority among many White people. It has not radically changed the socio-economic conditions of many Black people, though an attempt has been made towards such a change. Many Blacks still rank among the poorest in the land; they still find themselves in low-paid jobs; most still have a negative self-image - an image that was created by the former policy of apartheid. Without wishing to lapse into the previous dark history, I want to state unequivocally that, in order for both Blacks and Whites to heal from the negative effects of our past, we need to approach the future with openness and deal with every situation appropriately and to the best of our ability.

This overview of the historically subjected position of Blacks in South Africa has revealed the even more desperate situation of most Black women in these conditions. This general negative situation is aggravated by the fact that they were, and still are exploited by Black men (at home, in the church, at work). Black women thus know the interrelatedness of a variety of oppressive forces in their lives.<sup>18</sup> Commenting on some of these, William (1990:24) poses these questions:

I wonder which of the many oppressions in my femaleness and in my blackness weigh the heaviest on me? Which of the many liberations do I thirst for most? Do I thirst most of all to be liberated from my colour, from my class, my ignorance of my tradition, from economic domination? Or

is it the liberation from all male domination that women all over the world are struggling for today?

These questions portray the dilemma of a Black South African woman and bring us to an examination of classism as one of the factors that have an impact on the lives of Black women in the country.

b. *Classism*

Note has already been taken that the capitalist system of the previous government was built mainly on the abuse of labourers. Bennett (1992:170) maintains that a capitalist system requires a 'right-less' group of people who can be controlled and exploited in the labour market. In South Africa, this group consisted mainly of the Black working class. As can be expected, Black women have been the most exploited section of the population in this regard. According to William (1990:25), domestic workers and farm workers form the most oppressed and exploited of all working groups in the country. They do not have a recognised minimum wage, and are not protected by any laws.<sup>19</sup> Preston-White (1986:164-182) as quoted by William, states that these domestic workers are 'trapped workers' who are enmeshed in a situation of immense exploitation. The latter is evident in, amongst others, low wages, the lack of paid holidays, and the total lack of workers' rights.<sup>20</sup>

Most of these women may remain poor for the rest of their lives. Most of them participated in the first democratic elections of 1994, probably with the hope that the regime of the first black president would mark the end of their poverty: in other words that they would no longer live in shacks, that they would get jobs or better jobs, that they would have water (let alone running water),<sup>21</sup> that they would no longer struggle to get wood (which is increasingly difficult to get these days) to prepare the scarce and poor unappetising meals, if they happen to have food at all. Even though Blacks have political

power, economic power is still in the hands of the few Whites. Most of these Whites ensured the continuance of their wealth by privatised public property prior to the 1994 first democratic elections.

The situation is aggravated because the present government of national unity, unlike its predecessors, has many mouths to feed while resources are being diminished by high inflation rates and currency devaluations. It is thus obvious that unless a miracle happens, Blacks in South Africa, and in particular, Black women, may still expect to belong to the lowest class for the next decades.

It is, however, an encouraging sign that, despite all those negative conditions, Black feminist theologians do not lose faith in their God for they believe that God is on the side of the oppressed, the downtrodden and the poor (cf Jordaan 1992:125; William 1990:24). These women remain courageous and strong. William (1990:24) contends:

My offspring are stronger than me for they have sucked fertile milk from the bravest of the brave women. In poverty and in richness and in war I am still a woman. And I will remain a brave woman.

### c. *Gender asymmetry*

Another factor that strongly affects the life of a Black South African woman is gender asymmetry. Black South African women, like women globally, experience patriarchy as a system of injustice in their own lives. I intend using Lerner's (1986) definition of patriarchy as expounded in chapter one. This definition is applicable for patriarchy as experienced by Black (African) women in South Africa. Though they are subordinated to men on the grounds of the gender roles prescribed by their culture, the church or the Bible as well as the post-colonial system, they are not altogether powerless. For example, due to the previous system of apartheid, men had to migrate to urban areas to find work.

These migrant labourers were not permitted to take their families with them. Kretzschmar (1992:111) argues: 'The tragedy of this situation is that the very people who maintained the migrant system included thousands of Christians who confessed their belief in the sanctity of marriage; called God "Father" whilst depriving thousands of Black children of the presence of their fathers'. In such situations women were left to carry out the role of father and mother (cf Rivkin 1994:221). In executing both masculine and feminine roles, one cannot be regarded as being powerless.

Moreover in some cases, African women have served as royal leaders (chieftainesses). This is usually in a temporary capacity until the 'appropriate' male leader is ready to take over. I should, however, hasten to mention that even in such settings, men (the *kgoro*-royal court) have the ultimate say in decisions made.

The following section will focus briefly on how Black women experience gender asymmetry from the perspective of African culture and the Christian Church.

i. *The African culture*

As noted in the preceding section on African feminism, there are African feminist scholars who tend to idolise the African culture. They usually maintain that this culture only became oppressive with the advent of the colonialists (cf Rivkin 1994; Steady 1994). I hold a different view. African culture was mainly patriarchal even before the coming of the Whites in South Africa. There are elements within this culture (for example my Northern Sotho culture) which are not necessarily Western yet are essentially oppressive to women. A few examples will suffice: men are the heads of families whose words may not be questioned, especially not by women. Sometimes one may get the impression that women are classed with 'children'. The system of *lobola*, which precedes marriage, is used by the in-laws, particularly by the mothers and sisters, to subordinate and exploit

women (cf Kayango-Male & Oyango 1986; Masenya 1994b; Mathabane<sup>22</sup> 1994b:14-21).

I therefore endorse Ramodibe's (1989:14-21) words:

African tradition and culture present themselves to women as an oppressive system. It has a male domineering factor. It is a patriarchal system. This oppressive patriarchal system was found in South Africa even before Whites came with their Western capitalistic culture. Capitalistic culture has reinforced the oppressive system, out of which it derives more benefits.

The oppressive efforts of this culture are mostly experienced at home. A girl is not valued as highly as a boy. Sometimes after the birth of a girl, comments such as '*O felegeditše ba bangwe*' meaning 'She has just accompanied others' are heard. According to Mpumlwana (1992:383), by the time the girls are adults and get married, they know exactly what their role is: to serve their husbands with their bodies and strength, viz, by cooking and washing; if she does not do that, it is assumed that there is something wrong with her. A symptom of this can be found in the Northern Sotho proverb: *Mosadi ke tšhwene, o lewa mabogo* (A woman is a baboon her hands are eaten), meaning, the beauty and charm of a woman is found in her labour (that is in her daily household chores) and in her ability to take care of her husband. This proverb may be seen as a classic expression of how a woman is expected to behave in a marriage/family setting.

African culture thus expects a woman to be wholly subservient to her husband. She is mostly valued as a bearer of children, particularly sons. This is due to the patrilineal nature of African family relationships.

Despite this pervasive patriarchal set-up, a Northern Sotho woman in a normal family is not altogether devoid of power. She is responsible for the domestic sphere, where she wields power. The main disadvantage with her empowerment within this sphere, important though it is, is that patriarchal society does not regard it as being economically viable.

The public sphere, which traditionally used to be limited to men, is viewed to be better (cf Rosaldo 1974:17-42). Traditionally, the Northern Sotho woman could raise children, both boys and girls, but men later took over the education or schooling of boys. These women were also allowed to have some control over the produce of their fields, thus playing a significant role in subsistence farming.

The woman (even the paternal sister - *kgadi*) plays a significant role in the marriage affairs of children in the family. This is also the case even in rituals like ancestor veneration. Therefore it is worthwhile noting that the Northern Sotho culture is not wholly oppressive to women. This culture contains a number of elements which, if applied appropriately, may be enriching and empowering for both women and men. It is for example, of value for the oneness of the family. African people are family people. A family does not only consist of a man and a wife with their children, but is extended to include clans. This family spirit is in line with the African notion of corporeality. In Africa, we have a saying; '*Motho ke motho ka batho*' (A human being is (so) because of others). This saying expresses the notion that no person is an island unto herself/himself. This spirit of family unity, if harnessed and used to promote equality and mutuality between women and men, can have rewarding consequences for many marriages today. If an advocacy for the rights of women as full human beings could be viewed with sympathy and dedication by those who tend to view the African culture as static and not dynamic (cf Mncube 1992:356-358; Bam 1992:56) we could achieve much not only in the field of marital relationships but also in the relationships between women and men in general. Such close relationships are of vital necessity for a healthy society, particularly in South Africa which has been torn apart by violence and bloodshed.

This spirit of corporeality will also encourage Black women to come together and form a force against unjust structures impacting on their lives as women.



ii. *The Church in South Africa*

In apartheid South Africa, Christianity served as one vehicle for the state to further its ideology of apartheid. Thus both church theology and state theology served to enhance the interests of the apartheid regime with its hierarchical tendencies.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, many of the missionaries who brought the 'gospel' to Africans failed to live up to the demands of the gospel. Jordaan (1992:123) contends:

This "master" class of Whites also brought along with them a religion, named Christianity, for what they taught and lived was not Christianity of a Christ who had come to set the captives free, but rather of the one who said to Black people that they must be submissive to their bosses and indoctrinated them to believe that they are inferior beings, reducing them to nothingness.

In such a situation, the existence of a 'superior' White church and an 'inferior' Black church is understandable. The latter would obviously be controlled by the Whites. Hence the move by the so-called 'African Independent Churches' to break away from White imperialism in matters pertaining to religion. In the Black Church, the situation of a Black (Northern Sotho) woman is no better. In this church, she is known by her invisibility in as far as leadership positions, policy making, and other significant 'manly' issues are concerned (cf Bennett 1986:130-132; Ramodibe 1989:16-18; Jordaan 1992:43). Though Black women form the vast majority of the church membership, the Bible is interpreted for them by men. They cannot be ordained as ministers on the basis of the traditional views of the natural inferiority of women and her tendencies to be impure (through natural emissions). Though some Pentecostal churches are being opened up for the ordination of women, only a few of the mainline churches are taking up the challenge of acknowledging women as potential vessels for use by God.

It is, however, encouraging to recognise that as a result of the increasing pressure from women, who are no longer willing to be judged or viewed through men, the situation will hopefully change. This change may be enhanced by the present post-apartheid regime with its emphasis amongst others, on the empowerment of women.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. READING THE BIBLE FROM A NORTHERN SOTHO CONTEXT

To conclude this chapter, some attention will be paid to approaches to the Bible by Black feminist theologians in South Africa.

A survey of the works of those engaged in the liberation of Black women from a theological/biblical perspective shows that no substantial study has yet been undertaken on feminist biblical hermeneutics. This dearth of investigation may be ascribed to the recent origin of Black Feminist Theology. It only dates back to the early eighties. Moreover, there is a lack of theologically trained women. My bibliographical study has revealed that there is no African feminist biblical scholar in the country. Finally, a few snippets of information about the approach of a few individuals who have shown an interest in gender issues as they relate to the Bible will be in order:

#### a. *The social context of the readers*

What features strongly in feminist theological discourses of Black women in South Africa is a critique of their social context. Social norms have been unfair to women, having deprived them of their full rights as human beings. Women regard such a state of affairs as being contrary to God's will. Jordaan (1992:124), for instance, argues:

The very beginnings of humankind are challenged when living in the face of these demoralizing, dehumanizing conditions .... These dehumanizing

conditions are totally out of line with God's intention as at creation (cf also Bennett 1986:131-132).

In actual fact it would appear that in their feminist theological discourses most of these women elaborate on their context rather than on the Bible. They are acutely aware of their suffering as women.

b. *Approach(es) to the Bible*

Among the few feminist biblical scholars who pay attention to the Bible, option 1 in Sakenfeld still applies, that is: looking at texts about women to counteract famous texts used against women.

I have used this option in some of my articles (Masenya 1994b:35-48; 1995b:195). I have, however, also encouraged a Black feminist reading of Galatians 3:28, by stating, for example: 'A feminist interpretation of this text can be more appealing to the Black woman for in Christ we are one, whether Jew or Greek (race), slave or free (class), male or female (sex). In Christ human traditional classifications crumble down' (Masenya 1995b:195).

Within this same framework, I have also followed the tendency to refer to the example of Jesus Christ (Masenya 1994b:35-48; Masenya 1995b:195-196) in speaking directly to women in spite of Orthodox beliefs.

Another option mentioned in Sakenfeld's (1985) analysis used in Black South African feminist discourses is option 2, namely that of looking at the Bible generally for a theological perspective offering a critique of patriarchy.

This is the key option underlining my work in some articles already written on Black feminist hermeneutics (cf Masenya 1994b:35-48; Masenya 1995a:149-155). Here I

propound that the God of the Bible is the liberator of the slaves from Egypt, the same God who liberates us through the living Word that became flesh - Jesus, the Saviour of both women and men. Though the Bible is a product of patriarchal cultures, it bears witness to Jesus Christ who lives in the hearts of believers today. Christ becomes everything to the Black South African woman : a saviour, a friend, a comforter, a hope in the midst of dehumanising conditions. Jordaan (1992:125-127) also uses this option. She cites the incident of God's rescue of the Hebrew slaves and the liberatory text of Luke 4:18-19.

Mosala's (1988:2-9) approach seems to me to coincide with option 3 of Sakenfeld (1985), namely of looking at texts about women to learn more from the history and stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures. He sees the book of Esther as a patriarchal text and raises some objections against it. He, for example, mentions that it uses a female character to achieve patriarchal ends, while it also subordinates gender struggles to national struggles. Through such a reading the reader comes to grips with the patriarchy of the Scriptures. Mosala thus uses a hermeneutics of suspicion to question the function of this book in its setting. Mandew (1992:129-144) maintains that the implication of the type of biblical hermeneutics advocated by Mosala is that the situation of the reader (not only that behind the text) is also significant. What are the reader's class circumstances, ideological conditions and political commitment?<sup>25</sup>

I tend to agree with Mandew (1992:100) that the consequences of such an approach for a Black feminist biblical hermeneutics of liberation would be far reaching. From my formulation of the problem of this research in chapter one, one can guess that the approach propagated by Mosala, has some points of resemblance with the kind of approach I would like to propose in chapter four of this thesis. I intend to read the book of Proverbs by applying this approach. This is an approach that takes note of the social contexts of both the text and the reader, questioning the ideological commitments of both, while simultaneously unmasking the biases of both.

#### 4. EVALUATING BLACK FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Of most importance in this regard is that the lack of trained Black feminists in theology should be seriously questioned. Black feminist hermeneutics at a scholarly level is almost non-existent in the country. Women, who form the vast majority of church members and of the community of Bible readers, should take the responsibility for their liberation into their own hands. This process should aim at a liberation that would give them, amongst others, the opportunity to examine the Bible from their own perspective, a perspective that '... neutralizes male Biblical interpretations by foregrounding women and making them realize that they too (despised as they may be) have a place in ... the Bible' (Masenya 1994b:45).

## E. END NOTES

1. Lerner (1986:237) prefers the word 'emancipation' to 'liberation' (if used in a White woman's context I would suppose) for she feels that it conjures up political liberation movements of other groups such as colonials and racial minorities. The term also implies victimisation and a subjective consciousness in a group which strives to correct a wrong.
2. For more details about the nature of woman as a hermeneutical issue, see her article in Collins A Y (ed) 1985:11-33; see also Bird P (1994a).
3. M Tolbert (1990:12) also underlines the same idea of the power of the Bible on the lives of Protestants.
4. Cf Schüssler-Fiorenza (1992:125-132) for an elaboration on 'The ekklesia of women'.
5. My perception of Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza's hermeneutic framework is that it accommodates both women and other oppressed groups. This is also notable in her elaborate definition of patriarchy in her book (1992:105-124). I believe that such a framework will appeal to Third World Feminist hermeneutics.
6. Cf her article (1985:137-146) 'Authority and the challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation'.
7. Cf Mary-Ann Tolbert (1990:11-12) for an elaboration on the significance of Scripture in Protestantism.
8. Cf Bird (1994a:87) for an elaboration of this topic.
9. Cf especially Sakenfeld (1985:56-64). Parts of this material (with alterations as indicated) also appeared in my paper in *Scriptura* 1995b,189-201; see also Tolbert (1983:113-126).
10. Such a view is held by the radical branch of romantic feminism. For more details on this, see Osiek (1985:93-95).
11. The use of the word 'modern language' may be problematic in Third World contexts, particularly in those with a long history of colonialism. In such contexts, the native languages were generally despised.

12. Most if not all of the vernacular languages of South Africa may be more empowering regarding the use of the pronoun for God. In these languages the form of the pronoun is neuter.
13. Oduyoye, M A & Kanyoro, M R A (eds) 1992: The whole book focuses on the maltreatment that an African woman receives from her culture and the church and urges her to arise out of her situation.
14. Louise Tappa's (1989:33) usage of the word 'oppressed' in this context is problematic. The reader is therefore referred to the initial definition of patriarchy by Lerner in Chapter One. Though the average African woman finds herself in a subordinated position, it does not imply that she is totally powerless. Tappa also fails to take note of matriarchal societies in some African contexts. The fact is that some apparently powerless people, like women, can in some instances wield power (cf also Rosaldo (1974).
15. Cf the preceding section on African women's Christology. Cf also Okure, T, (1992:221-230).
16. Ramodibe's (1989) portrayal serves as an example of the abnormal division of resources that was practised by the South African apartheid regime.
17. I am not sure whether such an appropriation does justice to the name we give to our African women's liberation perspective in its uniqueness in the South African context. I intend addressing this issue in the fourth chapter. For more details on the need to rename ourselves as African women Bible interpreters, consult my article : African womanist Hermeneutics: A suppressed voice from South Africa speaks 1995a:149-155.
18. See also Mashinini (1992:345-352), Mpumlwana (1992:369:385), Bennett (1986:170).
19. For more information, see Lawson 1986. *Working women in South Africa*.
20. Though attempts have been made by workers' unions to improve their situations, they have not attained satisfactory results, particularly among those working for Blacks. The situation of the latter is understandable in the light of our past history as Black people. Nevertheless, we should take care not to act against what we are preaching, namely the liberation of all human beings.
21. Most of the women, particularly in some parts of the Northern Province struggle to get enough water for household purposes.

22. In his book *African women: Three generations*, Mathabane (1994) gives a lively and dramatic portrayal of the plight of African women of three generations in South Africa. *Lobola* is cited as one of the main factors used by some African men to subordinate women.
23. For more details, see the Kairos Document, 1986.
24. See Reconstruction and Development Programme : A Policy Framework 1994. This is a government (ANC) document outlining how to go about restructuring and developing South Africa in order to become a democratic, non-racist, non-sexist country.
25. Mosala (1991:50-60) uses the same approach in *Biblical hermeneutics in Black theology*. He cautions his fellow Black male theologians with regard to the use of the Bible in the Black struggle for liberation. He feels that note should be taken that the Bible is a product of class struggles. Black theologians should be careful not to use biblical texts produced within settings of oppression of the oppressors' time for the liberation of the oppressed.



## CHAPTER 3

### PROVERBS 31:10-31 IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Before we grapple with the text of Proverbs 31:10-31, it would be proper at this stage to understand this text in its immediate canonical setting asking such questions, as for example: What is the date of the material contained in the book of Proverbs? Can we establish the date of Proverbs 31:10-31? Can we trace its author/redactor and its audience? Is it possible to determine the class of the author/redactor? Is the author male or female? How is Proverbs 31, for example, related to Proverbs 31:1-9? How is this text related to the rest of the book, thematically and structurally?

The present section will address some of these questions with a view to locating the text as far as possible within its socio-historical setting and its immediate canonical setting.

#### A. THE DATE OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

##### 1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In order for us to locate the date of Proverbs 31:10-31 which forms an entity within the collection, Proverbs 30-31, it may be worthwhile to mention something about the date of the book as a whole. Indeed, most of the scholars dealing with the book, scarcely comment on the date of the specific text of Proverbs 31:10-31 per se, but basically focus on the date of the whole book. The probable reasons for this scarcity of information about our text in my view, are:

- a. The text forms part of a smaller collection (Pr 30-31) whose two titles have the names of non-Israelite persons (Agur and Lemuel;<sup>1</sup> cf also Whybray 1994:165).

There is a general agreement among commentators that these names do not belong to historic persons (cf Plaut 1961; Scott 1965; Toy 1977).

- b. It becomes difficult to date Proverbs 31:1-31 because it does not have a heading in the Hebrew text. Even though, as it now stands in the Hebrew canon, it forms part of Proverbs 31, it is an independent unit (cf Fontaine 1988:497; Whybray 1972:183; Cohen 1945:211). Perhaps this lack of title, and its position at the end of the book (an appendage to the book ?) is the reason why previous studies (of both male and female scholarship) have devoted little or no attention to the present paean. However, as some recent scholars have noted (cf Camp 1985; McCreesh 1985; Fontaine 1988), its position at the end of the book as we will later see, is by design, not by accident.

It is difficult to speak about the date of the whole book because it is a collection (Murphy 1960:8).<sup>2</sup> Murphy argues that Proverbs is a collection of wisdom pieces that presumably date from various periods and have different origins (cf also Fontaine 1988:495). What complicates the picture is that some of the material in collections that are dated late in Israelite history may not necessarily belong to that late age. For example, Plaut (1961:12) argues that the age of Part Five (Chapters 30-31) is uncertain, it is possibly the very last addition to Proverbs. Proverbs 31:10-31, which focuses basically on the family and the ideal wife in the family, is included in this collection and there is a general agreement among scholars that family/folk wisdom is one of the oldest forms of wisdom in Israel. Camp (1985:187) also maintains that we are not compelled to date the Proverbs poems of 1-9 and 31 in the era after the exile. It is possible that older works were used anew in this context.

Despite all these facts, there is a general consensus among commentators that the date of the redaction of the book of Proverbs is the post-exilic period (so Camp 1985:233-254; Scott 1965:15; Ringren 1947:8; Murphy 1960:9ff; Fontaine 1988:495; Fontaine

1992:145; Toy 1977:19-31). We may therefore argue that the book of Proverbs came to have a significant cultural effect during the post exilic period.

Camp (1985:234) dates the context of the redaction of the book in early post-exilic Palestine on the following convincing grounds:

- a. The book of Sirach (c 190 BCE) is construed as a result of the author's study 'on the law, the prophets, and the other writings of our ancestors'. In Sirach's book there are reminiscences of the book of Proverbs in particular, the development of a personified wisdom figure; hence a probability that the book of Proverbs was included among the other books of the writings referred to above.
- b. The failure of the book of Proverbs to reflect explicitly on the Torah may throw light on the date of the book. Seeing that the Torah played a significant role in Israelite history particularly during the post-exilic period, one would have expected the teaching of the Torah to come out clearly in this book. On the other hand, if the striking theological perspective of Proverbs 1-9 had been known and esteemed by the exilic editors of the Torah, one might have expected to see more traces of this perspective in the Torah than are apparent. 'We might then conclude that this theology was either unknown or unacceptable to these editors, its creation or its rehabilitation awaiting a later day' (Camp 1985:234).

Fontaine (1988:495) reinforces what Camp says. She argues that the book probably received its final editing in early post-exilic times, the latter part of the sixth century BCE, and hence it reflects the needs of the later community as well as the practical needs of the earlier monarchic period.

In a later article however, Camp (1991) shifts the dating of Proverbs 1-9 forward to the Hellenistic era on the following grounds:

- a. The biblical author's familiarity with the deuteronomic and priestly legislation of the Pentateuch.
- b. The presupposition in the poems of a walled Jerusalem, along with the urban setting of the prostitute.
- c. The possibility that the author models the literary structure of Proverbs 1-9 after the dimensions of the Temple in 1 Kings 6.

However, in my recent communication with her (cf 1996), she confessed that she is still unresolved as to which part of the post-exilic period the book of Proverbs was compiled in.

As indicated previously, there is agreement among scholars that Proverbs 31:10-31 is independent from 31:1-9. Fontaine (1988:497) argues that the poem's internal structure shows that it is originally an independent composition and not a continuation of the preceding Instruction (so Whybray 1972:183; Cohen 1945:211).

Having said all this, the pertinent question at this stage is : Is it possible to establish the date when Proverbs 31:10-31 was written? As I have already noted, few commentators focus on its dating. From the discussion which follows, we will hopefully have a glimpse of its date of origin.

## 2. THE DATE OF PROVERBS 31:10-31

Taking the text at face value, it might be argued that Proverbs 31:10-31 comes from a post-exilic date as it forms part of the book whose final redaction is put in the post-exilic period; indeed, commentators on the poem point to this. Fontaine (1988:184) says that the poem expresses the great value placed on the family as the significant social and religious unit within Israelite society, both in the pre-monarchical and in post-exilic

Judaism from which this composition probably comes (cf also Lyons 1987:241; Camp 1985:250-254).

The acrostic nature of Proverbs 31:10-31 makes some scholars (cf Whybray 1994:153; Scott 1965:22) to date the text in a later period, a period in which Israel was settled with own schools and institutions. Kidner (1985:54) however, argues that the occurrence of the acrostic form is too widespread to shed any light on the date of the passage. Indeed, the very lack of a heading as previously argued, contributes to the difficulty in tracing the exact date of the poem. Coupled with this fact, is the one already noted that there is some material in the Proverb collection which antedates the collections. For example, in the present text, the poet focuses on the family or the ideal wife in the family, even though, as Camp (1985) would argue, the family regained power as the locus of authority in the post-exilic period. Folk/family wisdom however was already extant in pre-monarchic Israel. According to Lyons (1987:237) the image of the **אִשָּׁת חַיִל** of our text seems to refer to a pre-monarchic ideal of wife and family.<sup>3</sup> Camp (1985:187) herself, as was previously noted maintains that we are not compelled to date the Proverbs poems of 1-9 and 31 in the post-exilic era for there is a possibility that older works were included in the collection.

Elsewhere (1990:193) however, Camp suggests that there is a possibility that the Woman of Worth in Proverbs 31:10-31 reflects a transition period from a time in which the public role of women was acknowledged and affirmed (cf Pr 1-9) to one in which the roles of women were more severely restricted (cf the Book of Sirach).

There are, however, scholars who assign a very late date to this poem. Among these are Wolters (1985:585-586) who suggests a Greek period due to the following reasons amongst others:

- a. The poem contains a bilingual wordplay between the Hebrew *Sôpiyyâ* and the Greek *Sophia* and thus presupposes a certain knowledge of Greek (though limited) on the part of both the author and the intended audience. According to Wolters (1985), it appears reasonable to assume that the song was probably composed sometime after Alexander's conquest (presumably in the third century BCE).
- b. Given the play of *Sophia*, coupled with the artful literary composition of the song as a whole, both the author and the intended audience, must have belonged to a sophisticated and highly literate milieu. Murphy (1981:82) also suggests the poem had an instructional intent.

Waegeman (1989:101) also holds the view of a later date for the book, a date later even than that (so Toy 1977) posited by Wolters. She says that the date of its completion fell no earlier than the second century BC. She argues that the ideology and mentality with regard to women reflected in this text belong to the Hellenistic period. The author devotes her article to a comparison between the duties of an upper-class house wife (as outlined by Xenophon in his *Oeconomicus*) and those of 'the perfect housewife of Proverbia' and concludes that there are similarities between the two, hence her Hellenistic dating of the book.

As Camp (1990:194) notes, Wolter's conclusion is not without problems. One may ask the following question: Can a wordplay on just one word (cf *Sôpiyya*) in the text be sufficient proof for the dating of the whole text, that is, 31:10-31? Did the Hebrew sages know Greek only during and after the period of Alexander? Washington (1994:220) seems to endorse my questioning of Wolter's argument when he argues:

Since Proverbs contains only this single Hebrew-Greek wordplay, but shows no thematic interaction with Greek ideas, we should conceive of some author with some knowledge of the Greek language, but only the remotest sense of Greek culture. This fits best the Achaemenid era.

Waegeman's conclusion about a Hellenistic period based on her claim on the apparent similarities between the wife of Proverbs and the Greek upper-class house wife is not without problems either. Does it mean for example, that in the different periods of Israelite history, there were no upper class '*independent*' women as she describes the woman portrayed in this text? McCreesh (1985), Camp (1985), and Fontaine (1988) understand the poem on a metaphorical level; Waegeman (1989:106) frankly notes that her study is limited to the surface level. If they are correct, would Waegeman's assumptions still hold water?

I have already pointed out that dating the present poem is problematic. Waegeman (1989:105) is correct when she notes: 'It is regretful so little is known of her background, since precise information concerning the origins of this part of Proverbia is wanting'.

For the purposes of the present study, it will suffice to date the redaction/compilation of the passage, in line with the general dating of the whole book, in the post-exilic period. This does not necessarily entail that the material contained in this poem is exclusively post-exilic. In view of the older nature of family wisdom, on which our poem and some parts of the book focus, it is possible that we are in the present text, dealing with pre-exilic material (cf Camp 1985:187; Lyons 1987:237).

However, Camp (1996) observes that it is important to be exact about determining in which part of the post-exilic period the book of Proverbs (including 31:10-31) was set. She argues that such a knowledge is necessary if we wish to address the issue of class and institutional context. These issues are important for the present researcher as I wish to go beyond the androcentricity of the biblical text, to address also the question of the class of the author and that of the audience.

Camp (1996) argues that if we place the setting of the book in the early post-exilic period, it might be difficult to speak about an established or real elite, though there could have

been some pretence of belonging to a higher class (cf her 1985 book with her proposal for an egalitarian society during this early post-exilic period). The reason for this lack of an established elite during this early (Achaemenid) period according to Camp is that everybody was struggling for survival. She argues that a later (possibly Hellenistic) date would suit better the notion of the established elite.

However, some scholars (cf Blenkinsopp 1991; Horsley 1991; Washington 1994) discuss the existence of such an elite group during the Achaemenid period. In this regard Blenkinsopp (1991:47) remarks:

... there seems to be a more specialised connotation where the Nehemiah memoir speaks of "Jews" as a privileged class distinct from the common folk, and the most likely explanation is that he is referring to the socially and economically superior stratum of Babylonian immigrants.

Horsley (1991:170-171) also sheds some light on the class issue in the early post-exilic period when he mentions that the returnees were the descendants of the Jerusalem elite. A critical scrutiny of the biblical sources for the period reflects:

... a situation in which the descendants of the exiles are simply re-establishing their traditional position as a "community" of the powerful - the dominant lineages together with their retainers - for the priestly temple apparatus which ruled under Persian mandate.

As we will later observe, the very same group of elite, who formed the leadership of the Temple community determined the criteria which defined a true Jew and who was precisely allowed to be a true member of the **הלל** community.

For the present researcher, the arguments in favour of the early post-exilic period for the date of the book's compilation (including Proverbs 31:10-31) and its setting appear to be



convincing. Therefore assumptions about the date and setting of the book of Proverbs including Proverbs 31:10-31 in this thesis will be based on this early post-exilic dating.

Having got a glimpse on the probable dating of the book of Proverbs, and in particular the text of Proverbs 31:10-31, it might be worthwhile to look into the question of its authorship and intended audience.

## **B. THE REDACTOR OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS**

### **1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

In this section I intend focusing on the following questions: Who is the author/redactor of the book of Proverbs and of Proverbs 31:10-31? Is the redactor male or female? The latter question has always been taken for granted in past biblical scholarship. With the advent of feminist theology, with its critique of the androcentricity of the biblical text and the patriarchal culture(s) that produced most or all of the Old Testament, such an assumption may no longer be taken for granted. The question is necessitated by the perception that there are ideological interests in the biblical text and hence the need to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion in one's reading: Whose interests for example, does the author of the present text serve? Mosala (1995)<sup>4</sup> would ask the following questions, which to my mind are relevant for the present research: What are the interests of the author? What is his/her agenda? What is the author's programme? What is the class of the author?

In line with my perception of the multiple forms of oppression (racism, classism, sexism) experienced by an average African woman in South Africa, a woman who is the basic client of the present research, one could even consider the question of the 'race' of the author. One would probably meet with problems in analysing the latter for according to Felder (1991:127) ancient authors of biblical texts did have a colour consciousness

(awareness of certain physiological differences), however, this consciousness of colour/race, was by no means a political or ideological basis for enslaving, oppressing or in any way demeaning people of other races. 'In fact, the Bible contains no narratives in which the original intent was to negate the full humanity of black people or view blacks in an unfavourable light. Such negative attitudes about black people are entirely post-biblical' (Felder 1991:127).

## 2. THE SEX OF THE AUTHOR(S)/REDACTOR(S)

There is a general agreement among scholars that the author of the book of Proverbs (including Pr 31:10-31) is male and that the interests he serves are also male-oriented. This makes sense in the light of the patriarchal culture that produced the Old Testament. According to Fontaine (1992:145) the authors of the Proverbs were the bureaucrats or 'sages' of their society, who worked in the circles of the court as counsellors and educators. 'These *men* used literary forms and theological concepts borrowed and modified from wisdom traditions of the surrounding nations ...' (my emphasis). Commenting on the status of woman in the Book of Proverbs, Bird (1974:60) argues that from the male perspective of the Book, women can either make a man or destroy him.

In her analysis of the power of Woman Wisdom, Camp (1987:51) also warns against

... too quickly embracing *patriarchy's* definition of success  
.... Wisdom's house remains a space apart from the *dominant male* model; it prefers an alternative not yet fully known or claimed, while standing yet within the reality of *patriarchy* as we know it. Vulnerable to co-optation by *men*, it is also available to empower women (my emphasis).<sup>5</sup>

Previous male scholarship of the book of Proverbs also takes it for granted that the author/editor(s) of the book was/were male (cf Mckane 1970; Plaut 1961; Scott 1965).

Of the female scholarship on the book, only Brenner (1993:116-130) to my knowledge, suggests that the Instruction in Proverbs 1-9 and the poem of the Woman of Worth in Proverbs 31 should be viewed as containing female voices. Her arguments are, however, not convincing. At face value, the Instruction (which is believed to have links with an Egyptian male-oriented one) has the male rubric 'my son' with the male subject אב. Whatever the latter stands for (whether a wisdom teacher, a father in the family, a court instructor), it is a male figure. A careful reading of Proverbs 31:10-31, as we will later observe, shows that the male voice (rather than the female voice as Brenner suggests) can be heard in this text.

Headings of some of the collections in the Book of Proverbs, except for Proverbs 31:1-9 on the Instruction from king Lemuel's mother,<sup>6</sup> also point to the male authorship of the book. (Cf Pr 1:1: 'the proverbs of *Solomon*'; Pr 30: 'The words of Agur *son* of Jakeh'.) For the heading of collection 4 (25:1-29:27) the Hebrew text is replete with male names such as:

גם אלה מושלי שלמה אשר העתיקו אנשי חזקיה מלך יהודה 'These are the proverbs of *Solomon* which the *men* of *Hezekiah*, *king* of Judah copied' - (RSV; my emphasis).

The information in the preceding lines reveals that the book of Proverbs including our paean was written by males.

### 3. THE CLASS OF THE AUTHOR(S)/REDACTOR(S)

We may now ask the question about the class of the redactors of the book of Proverbs. The well-planned, systematic and artistic material presented by the book shows that it probably comes from the elite class of the time. Fontaine (1993:108) is right when she says: '... for it is clear that when we first hear the voices of the wise in Proverbs, we are hearing the speech of the artistic elite'.

In the light of our observation of the existence of an elite class in the early post-exilic period, we might not be exaggerating to postulate that the redactors of the book of Proverbs were members of this group. These were possibly part of '... the nobility, priests, Levites and other temple personnel ...' (Horsley 1991:171).

It is worthy to note that although it is assumed that there is evidence of the world view of a professional elite in the book, this worldview is not so divorced from the everyday world of family and clan wisdom (Fontaine 1993:106). Perhaps this ranks amongst one of the reasons why the book was read by everybody, rural and urban, rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed. Perhaps that is why such a scholarly work of art has also attracted the attention of African women in South Africa - women mostly at the bottom of the kyriarchal ladder as I have argued previously. Fontaine (1992:147) rightly argues:

For those who have been mostly excluded from participation in the great traditions of covenant and prophecy, the wisdom tradition's emphasis on the world of daily life offers a basis for valuing women's experience as an authentic, revelatory way of knowing and being.

The preceding quotation shows that the wisdom tradition can be empowering for those who have been excluded. In the South African context, we may note for example, the Blacks, the non-Christians, the poor, women and the handicapped, to name but a few. Such may be refreshed by the 'inclusivity' of the wisdom tradition.

The question that now remains is: Who are the readers of the book of Proverbs?

### **C. THE AUDIENCE OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS**

As might be expected, the readership intended for this book with its elite setting would be male. Camp (1990:59) notes: 'Post-exilic Israel was, of course, still a patriarchal society with most formal public roles reserved for men'.

Fontaine (1988:502) observes that since the feminine is always viewed as ancillary and contingent with androcentric thought, it functions logically as a natural mediator between a male god and the male students who are the audience of the sage. The introductory section of the book (cf 1-9) also bears witness to the male readership of this book, for example, the rubric ׀׀׀ which forms part of the genre of Instruction. The function of this literature was to train the male youths who were to take up respective posts at court as copyists, translators and the many odd jobs engendered by bureaucracy (cf Murphy 1960:10; cf also Whybray 1994:11).

If the preceding information is correct, we may also assume that the class of the readers matches the author's class - an elitist class; hence the interests served by the author will probably be those of the same class.

From what has been said about the male authorship of the book of Proverbs, it is clear that the book basically serves male interests. The feminine comes in as ancillary (cf Fontaine 1988:502); the positive and negative roles of women are viewed basically from the perspective of what they provide for the men involved (Fontaine 1992:146). Swidler (1979:125)<sup>7</sup> shares a similar view: '... women are praised only in their roles as related beneficially to men, that is as mothers and wives. (It is also interesting that, although fathers are praised here, good husbands are never lauded or even mentioned - only good wives: a clear sign of total male orientation)'.

Having commented on the redactor and readers of the book of Proverbs, we may now turn to the question of the author/redactor of Proverbs 31:10-31:

#### D. THE AUTHORSHIP/REDACTION AND READERSHIP OF PROVERBS 31:10-31

What has been said above on the author and readers of the whole book of Proverbs appear to be applicable to the present text. What may be of importance at this stage might be to highlight some aspects of the androcentricity of the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31. Though our poem does not have a title to guide us regarding its authorship, we may assume that its author/redactor was a male. The very first rhetorical question on a Woman of Worth to be 'found' is, in my view, sufficient proof that the poem is male oriented. In a patriarchal elite setting, young men of class (and not women) would be much concerned about their future wives. Which qualities are found in a good wife? How would a supportive wife be qualified? Such questions are a reflection of the significance attached by the ancient Israelite to the welfare and reputation of the family: '... material prosperity and good standing (of men) in the community go together, and a good wife is necessary to their achievement' (Whybray 1972:184; brackets mine).

J I agree with Swidler (1979:125) that good husbands are never lauded or even mentioned, only good wives. While a wife's support to her family (husband included) is appreciated, it becomes unfortunate if she is the only one expected by society or a patriarchal status quo to play a supportive role. Both husband and wife need each other for the welfare of the family. Both man and woman qualify to work in the home (private sphere) - a sphere portrayed by the poem as a 'womanly' sphere. This is in opposition to the gates, **בשערים** (v 23) which is a public sphere - a sphere which appears to be 'manly' according to the poem.

If the sage(s) who wrote the book of Proverbs (Pr 31:10-31) were not one-sided, one would have expected to find a poem that lauds a good husband as well (see also Weems 1995).<sup>8</sup>

Some feminist scholars feel that the אִשָּׁת חַיִּל of Proverbs 31:10-31 is not independent for she lives to enhance the interests of her husband and children. According to Fontaine (1988:516) the woman depicted in Proverbs 31:10-31 is wholly 'male-identified', that is, from the perspective of roles enabling the lives of men to depend on her. In the same way, Carmody (1988:73) observes:

In a single text, then, we find the ambiguity of the heritage bequeathed women by the Hebrew Bible. Even at its moments of high praise, the Bible reflects a man's world. From the Eve created as the helpmate of Adam to the good wife who eases the life of her senatorial husband, woman is the second sex.

The class of woman portrayed in our poem also suggests that the readers (young men of repute who aspire for such a wife) probably come from a higher class. It is indisputable that the אִשָּׁת חַיִּל is an upper class woman (cf Fontaine 1988:516; Waegeman 1989:101; McCreech 1985:31). Fontaine (1992:152) notes that the family unit pictured in Proverbs 31:10-31 is an elite one in keeping with the social background and goals of the sages.

We may therefore assume that the poem was probably addressed to young men of the elite, probably of marriageable age. Whybray (1972:184) contrary to Crook (1954:137) holds a similar view when he says that though it has been said that the poem is a handbook for brides (see Crook 1954), everything is viewed from a male perspective and the likelihood is that it is a manual for prospective grooms.

From what has been noted about the androcentricity of the poem, Brenner's suggestion (1993:127) that the present poem is a mother's Instruction to a daughter does not sound convincing.

By way of concluding the section on the authorship/redaction and destination of the book of Proverbs (including Pr 31:10-31) we may point out that the text(s) come from the hands of elite post-exilic men with young men of the elite as their intended audience.

In the next section, I intend locating Proverbs 31:10-31 in its immediate canonical context, that is, in relation to the whole book and in relation to Proverbs 31:1-9, an Instruction that precedes it. Does our paean fit in harmoniously or smoothly in its immediate canonical setting? Such an exercise is necessary due to the conviction of the present researcher that historical-critical studies of biblical texts are as important as reader-oriented approaches like women's liberation approaches.

## **E. PROVERBS 31:10-31 IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS**

This section will basically focus on Proverbs 31 and the introductory section of the book (1-9) and Proverbs 31:10-31 in relation to the intervening material (10:1-30:33).

### **1. PROVERBS 31 AND PROVERBS 1-9**

In her book, *Wisdom and the feminine in the book of Proverbs*, Claudia Camp (1985:179-208) has in my view, successfully shown the interrelationships between the various collections of the book of Proverbs. She<sup>9</sup> convincingly shows the connections between Proverbs 1-9 and Proverbs 31 and concludes:

There exists, then a significant amount of evidence for viewing a female imagery in Prov 1-9 and 31 as a bracketing device that creates a kind of framework around the proverb collection and affords the book some semblance of intentional composition (Camp 1985:191).



Fontaine (1988:501) seems to endorse what Camp says for she notes that female imagery functions as a frame for some collections of the book of Proverbs. She cites as examples, Woman Wisdom and Woman Stranger in Proverbs 1-9; the mother of Lemuel (cf 31:1-9) and the Woman of Worth (cf 31:10-31) and argues that we cannot ignore the canonical function of the Woman of Worth in Proverbs 31.

A few examples of the similarities of the female imagery of Proverbs 1-9 and Proverbs 31 will be in order: Whybray (1994:161) observes that in contrast to most of the other Old Testament books, the female figures employed in Proverbs 1-9 and Proverbs 31 are active and dominant compared to their partners. In 31:10-31, the husband plays a very minor role, it is the wife who promotes the wealth and prestige of the family, not only catering for the needs of her husband, children and servants, but also maintaining a successful cottage industry, even buying a field and planting a vineyard. McCreech (1985:27) argues: 'The husband's "weighty and honourable" profession among the elders at the city gates (v 23) pales in significance when contrasted with the whirlwind of activity and achievement that is his wife'.

In Chapters 1-9, it is Wisdom (Woman Wisdom) who builds a house (cf 9:1), it is she who prepares a feast and invites people to come and share in the celebration (9:5). She appears to be a strong, independent figure.

Coupled with the notion of the house, is the fact that the setting for this female imagery is domestic (Whybray 1994:161; Meyers 1991:47-49). Meyers (1991:48) argues that the prominence of the interwoven motifs of woman, household and instruction for both personified Wisdom of Chapters 1-9 and the human woman of Chapter 31 is worthy of note particularly because these two sections provide a female-oriented framework for the whole book. She further argues that 'Even Woman Wisdom's cosmic role is couched in the metaphor of the house she builds and the table over which she presides' (Meyers 1991:48).

The setting for the female figures of 1-9 and 31 does not appear to be restricted to a domestic one, however, this we will discuss at a later stage: Woman Wisdom (1-9) goes to the gates to invite people to her feast, Woman Stranger (1-9) goes out to entice men, the Woman of Worth goes out and buys a field.

Apart from the similarities of female imagery in Proverbs 1-9 and Proverbs 31, there are other correlations notable between these two sections:

- a. The teaching of the mother **תּוֹרַת אִמִּךָ** of 1:8 reappears thematically in 31:1-9. The latter is purported to be the teaching by the mother of Lemuel and 31:26 speaks of the woman's wisdom **חִכְמָה** and her teaching of steadfastness, **תּוֹרַת חֶסֶד** (Camp 1985:188; see also Whybray 1994:161).
- b. In 31:10, the Woman of Worth is said to be 'more precious than jewels' as is Wisdom in 3:15 and 8:11 (Camp 1985:188; McCreesh 1985:41, 42; Whybray 1994:162).
- c. McCreesh (1985:42) notes an example about the description of the husband of the **אִשָּׁת חַיִּל** in verse 11:

**בְּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בַּעֲלָהּ** The heart of her husband trusts her  
**וְשָׁלַל לֹא יִחְסֵר** and he will have no lack of gain

This is reminiscent of the sentiments urged upon the student of wisdom in chapter 4:6-9:

Do not forsake her, and she will keep you, love her, and she will guard you...; prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honour you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.

- d. Just as nothing a person desires can compare with Wisdom (3:15), so also the **אִשָּׁה חַיִּל** in her husband's eyes, surpasses even the most worthy **חַיִּל** of other women (31:29; Camp 1985:188).
- e. According to Whybray (1994:161), the opening line of the poem, 'Who can find a capable wife'? **אִשָּׁה חַיִּל מִי יִמְצָא** (31:10a) expresses what was evidently a commonplace concern in ancient Israel (cf Prov 12:4; 18:22) but in a wider sense, the verb **יִמְצָא** (to find) represents a principal topic in Proverbs 1-9 where, in at least five verses (1:28; 3:13; 4:22; 8:17, 35), it refers to the importance of 'finding' Wisdom and her teaching.

Those who find Wisdom are pronounced 'happy' and it is promised that they will find life.

These apparent similarities between Wisdom in 1-9 and the Woman of Worth in Proverbs 31:10-31 have led McCreesh (1985) and some other scholars (cf also Camp 1985) to regard the Woman of Worth of Proverbs 31:10-31 as wisdom personified. McCreesh (1985:25-26) argues:

Prov 31:10-31 draws together the major themes, motifs, and ideas of the book in a final, summarizing statement about wisdom under the image of an industrious, resourceful and selfless wife. It is the final piece in a symbolic framework that unifies the whole book, including the individual sayings. In turn, the symbolic framework presents a coherent statement about the nature of wisdom.

From the preceding discussion of the relationships and resemblances between 31:10-31 and 1-9, one may agree with Whybray (1994:161) that '... the affinities between Chs 1-9 and 31:10-31 are unmistakable'. These affinities suggest a conscious systematisation and arrangement of the whole book by the same editor(s).

We may now conclude that Proverbs 31:10-31 as a concluding section of the book is not accidental. Its present location in its immediate canonical context has been carefully planned.

Having established the relationship between Proverbs 1-9 and Proverbs 31, we may now investigate the possibility of any linkages between Proverbs 31 and the intervening material between 1-9 and 31 in order to gain a better understanding of Proverbs 31:10-31 in its immediate canonical context.

## 2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROVERBS 1-9, PROVERBS 31:10-31 AND PROVERBS 10:1-31:9

- a. In his attempt to reveal the conspicuousness of female imagery in Proverbs 1-9, Whybray (1994:161) notes that whereas in 10:1-31:9, the word אִשָּׁה (woman) occurs only thirteen times, in Chapters 1-9, more than half of the total number of verses (256) in one way or another, deal with female figures: with mother, bride, wife, adulteress, prostitute, personified Wisdom and Folly.

The preceding statement shows that the intervening material (Pr 10:1-31:9) also has female imagery though the latter is not as foregrounded in this section as it is in 1-9 and 31:10-31.

- b. McCreesh (1985:41-42) who finds many allusions to wisdom in Proverbs 31:10-31 argues that the wife in verse 1, is compared to מַפְנִינִים variously translated as 'pearls,' 'corals' or simply 'jewels'- she is more precious than jewels. The same word, reading קָרָה, is used to describe wisdom in Proverbs 3:15 -- יְקָרָה הִיא מִפְנִינִים (she is more precious than jewels). Wisdom is further compared to precious jewels in 21:15; 18:19 and 16:16. Camp(1985:101) notes that the use of the imagery of treasure (particularly precious metals and jewels)

associated with wisdom and righteousness is well attested to in the Proverb collection (10:20; 16:16; 10:15; 22:1; 25:11; 25:12).

- c. Camp (1985:192) suggests that Proverbs 8:36, which she assumes to be later, is an apparent adaptation of Proverbs 18:22:

The one who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from God.

In 8:35, female Wisdom says with regard to herself:

The one who finds me finds life and obtains favour from Yahweh.

Camp(1985:192-193) then notes: 'The statements are virtually identical with the exception of what might be considered a "theological heightening" in the poem, where the "good thing" that is found is specified as "life".'

The finding of a wife in 18:22 reminds one of the finding (אִשָּׁה חַתָּל) of the אִשָּׁה חַתָּל of Proverbs 31:10-31.

- d. Camp (1985:200) notes another interesting connection between 1-9, 31 and the intervening material of 10:1-30:33: The instruction by the mother and father in 23:22-24:4 repeats three major warnings (against harlotrous women, strong drink and violent men), two of which (violent men and harlotrous women) are found in the instructions by the father and mother in 1-9, and two of which (harlotrous women and strong drink) are found in the instruction by Lemuel's mother.

As a result of these connections or relationships between the main sections of the book (1-9; 10:1-30:33 and 31) we remain with one systematic whole. Camp (1985:191-192) notes: 'The repetition of the proverb collection in the surrounding poems also helps to unify these several parts into a single composition...'.<sup>10</sup>

My intention in the preceding section has been to locate Proverbs 31 and in particular 31:10-31 in its immediate canonical setting. Does it fit harmoniously in the latter or is

it misplaced? Are there some structural and thematic resemblances between the text and the rest of the book? It became clear that Proverbs 31:10-31 forms part of the envelope (coda) of the whole book and that its canonical position at the end of the book is thus a necessity. It also became clear that Proverbs 31:10-31 shares some thematic and structural resemblances, not only with Proverbs 1-9, but also with the intervening material in 10:1-31:9. Such an investigation reveals that, in order for us to do justice to the study of Proverbs 31:10-31, we must study it against its own canonical context. It should not be studied as a single entity.

With this information in mind, we may now take a look at Proverbs 31:10-31 within Proverbs 31.

### 3. PROVERBS 31:10-31 WITHIN PROVERBS 31

The Hebrew text of what is now designated Proverbs 31 is constituted by two distinct poems:

- a. Instructions introduced by the heading 'The Words of Lemuel' (vss 1-9) and
- b. The Excellent wife (vss 10-31).

Worthy of note is the fact that in the LXX the two poems do not appear consecutively<sup>11</sup> as in the Hebrew text (Lichtenstein 1982:202).

As to the position of 31:1-9 and 31:10-31 in the LXX, Kidner (1985:54) suggests that the fact that the LXX separates the two suggests that these poems may have circulated separately from one another before their inclusion in the book of Proverbs. He further argues that the separation of the poems suggests that the acrostic poem is anonymous rather than a continuation of the advice given to King Lemuel.

Several scholars (cf Cohen 1945:211; Fontaine 1988:497; Whybray 1972:183) endorse Kidner's view about the independence of 31:10-31 from 31:1-9.

Lichtenstein (1982:202) however, notes several features common to both poems which may account for their juxtaposition:

- a. The actual instructions ascribed ostensibly to Lemuel or rather to Lemuel's mother, begin with particular reference to women (v3 נְשִׂאִים) as does the second poem (v10 נְשִׂאִים). This reminds one of the female imagery found in the book as a whole and in particular, the book's coda (1-9 and 31).
- b. In 31:1-9, it is the נְשִׂאִים (v3) of the king, whatever the interpretation of the word is, which is to be protected from women while in the second poem (vss 10, 29), נְשִׂאִים constitutes the quintessence of the kind of woman portrayed.
- c. Even as the mother of Lemuel is charged to 'speak up' (vss 8, 9 פתח פִּיךָ) on behalf of the wretched, so the woman of 31:10-31 'speaks up' (v 26, פתח פִּיךָ) with wisdom and graciousness.

Apart from these thematic and verbal links, Lichtenstein (1982:203) notes some striking structural analogies to be drawn between the two poems of Proverbs 31. He argues that both poems have lines with a chiasmic structure: Each poem presents one example of the pattern A:B::B:A in which the initial order of key terms is reversed in their repetition, thus creating an elegant symmetrical balance of equal, albeit opposite, words and phrases.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these apparent resemblances between the two poems of Proverbs 31, one would support the view of scholars who see 31:10-31 as independent from 31:1-9. Even Lichtenstein does not seem to suggest that the two form a whole. He simply accounts for why the two have been juxtaposed with each other in the Hebrew text.

The acrostic nature of 31:10-31 is in my view (cf Cohen 1945:241; McCreesh 1985:25) one of the proofs that here in verse 10 of Proverbs 31, a new section starts. The genre of 31:1-9 is an Instruction, reminding us of the Instructions of Chapters 1-9; though the present one is written by a woman, a rare occurrence as we have noted. Murphy's (1981:81) remark in this regard is worthy of note:

This is a typical instruction for royalty, which finds its counterpart in the Egyptian Instructions of Amenemhet and Merikare, which are directed to kings (ANET, 414-19) .... It is unusual, however, in that the instruction is given by a woman. If one translates "Lemuel, king of Massa", the unit may be taken as an appropriation of non-Israelite wisdom (perhaps Edomite?), and the Aramaic forms in vv 2-3 suggest foreign origin (cf also Fontaine 1988:515).

One notes two interesting features of 31:1-9 from the preceding statement:

- a. That the author is purported to be a woman, and
- b. That it is (might be) non-Israelite in origin. If these observations are true, the Instruction of 31:1-9 may be empowering to those who have been excluded by the patriarchal status quo (women), as well as those who have been excluded on the basis of their location 'outside' Israel's traditions (non-Israelites), and on the basis of their location 'outside' the 'chosen' race, (in this case the Israelite nation). In other contexts, like the South African one, African (Northern Sotho) women in particular might be enriched by this Instruction as they are women from an outside race.

One other notable point of difference between 31:1-9 and 31:10-31 is that, though both speak about women (in line with the female imagery of the whole book), in the former, women are to be guarded against. This is a negative portrayal of women, unfortunately by another woman (if we subscribe to a view about the female authorship of the section). By contrast, in 31:10-31, a woman is lauded. Proverbs 31:10-31 is the only acrostic



poem in the whole Hebrew text that lauds a woman - a fact warranting further investigation in view of the androcentric nature of the Old Testament canon. I hope to revisit this point at a later stage.

A word about the acrostic nature of Proverbs 31:10-31 will be in order at this stage. In Proverbs 31:10-31 we find a complete acrostic poem, one in which every line begins with successive letters of the alphabet (cf Fontaine 1988:497; McCreesh 1985:25; Whybray 1994:160). McKane (1970:665) notes that the author of 31:10-31 had enough on his hands with the acrostic principle to work out. As he tackled the verses individually, he did not think about what had gone before or what was to come after, except in so far as he was guided by the overall subject of the poem and had a mental picture of the woman he intended to portray. Whybray (1994:160) observes that there is considerable agreement that the main purpose, if not the only one, of the alphabetic acrostic in the Old Testament is to convey the notion of totality or completeness. According to him,

This is especially plausible in the case of Proverbs 31:10-31, which not only completes the book of Proverbs but also comprises such a comprehensive list of virtues that it might be said to be intended to constitute in itself a compendium of all human wisdom.

We may conclude that though 31:10-31 and 31:1-9 have apparent similarities (thematically, structurally and stylistically), as Lichtenstein (1982) has revealed, the two do not form a whole. The apparent similarities may point to the careful redaction of the whole book by a single editor. It has been noted previously that Proverbs 1-9 and 31 form an envelope for the whole book. It is no wonder that the editor of the book of Proverbs, with his interest in female imagery, could have put side by side two poems, one by a woman (31:1-9) another lauding a woman (30:10-31).

Before I attempt an exegesis of Proverbs 31:10-31, it may be beneficial for the present study to get a picture of the image of woman in the book of Proverbs. Note has already

been taken of the use of female imagery in the book, in particular 1-9 and 31. As Newsom (1989:142) observes:

... it is significant that though woman is not the sole topic of the chapters, talk about women and women's speech occupies an astonishing amount of the text - men, preoccupied with speech, talking about women and women's speech.

Why is this the case? I hope to address this question in the following section.

## **F. THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS**

The text on which the present research is based focuses on a woman. Proverbs 31:10-31 is a poem which praises a good woman. It has already been noted that the coda of the book is clothed with female imagery. We have also observed that even the Proverb collections within the envelope sometimes deal with female imagery - mother or wife.

The intention of the present section is therefore to provide a picture of the image of women in the book of Proverbs. How did these images function within the socio-historical setting in which the book was written? Such an investigation will hopefully help us to have a better understanding of the image(s) of woman reflected in Proverbs 31:10-31.

Bird (1974:57) identifies three major dominant types of references to women in the book of Proverbs: a) the mother, b) the wife and c) the 'other/foreign' woman. In the following discussion, I will focus on each of these images.

## 1. THE IMAGE OF MOTHER IN PROVERBS

Motherhood was a universal role in Israel (Camp 1985:81). Otwell (1977:40) cautions that a study of the status of the Israelite mother must take note of the precariousness of survival in ancient Palestine. Group survival according to him, must have been the primary issue facing the Israelites most of the time.

Camp (1985:81) notes that due to Proverbs' characteristic stress on the correct functioning of society, it is not surprising that in this book, where the mother imagery occurs, it is neither biological nor theological but educational. Bird (1974:57) seems to reinforce the same view when she argues: 'She (the mother) is not merely the womb that bears a man but a source of wisdom essential to life'.

This educational function of the mother in the Book of Proverbs, is more notable in texts where the mother is cited side by side with the father in the nurturing of the children - 1:8; 4:3-4; 6:20 (Camp 1985:82; Swidler 1979:124; Otwell 1977:13; Meyers 1988:150). In my study of parent-child relationships as portrayed in the Hebrew and Northern Sotho cultures, I have also brought to light the significant role the Israelite mother played in the education of her children (Masenya 1989).

Meyers (1988:151) notes that the listing of each parent individually in these texts should be viewed not as accommodating the needs of parallelism in the poetic form of Proverbs, but probably as indicating the complementary contributions of each parent to the socialisation of the young. According to her, in the absence of a generic term for parent in the Hebrew language, it may have been the only way to express combined maternal and paternal responsibility.

It is however, interesting and surprising to note with Camp (1985:82), that there is a total lack of mother imagery (in the sense of mother as child-bearer, I would suggest) applied

to personified Wisdom and to the Woman of Worth. Such imagery is not required for these female figures, either to attain authority in their own homes or to enter into the public sphere (1:20-21; 8:1-3, 14-16; 31:13, 14, 18, 20, 24). In this way, Camp (1985:82) further notes, in the book of Proverbs, the woman is portrayed as a virtual equal of the man, much like Eve at creation. There is a paradox in that children, help women to gain a certain kind of authority, for she is more valued the more she has of them, while on the other hand bearing children marks her as subordinate because she needs to have them in order to have that authority (cf Tribble 1978:133-134). This is absent from the female imagery in Proverbs once it goes beyond its more secular notes about the (equal) role of fathers and mothers in instruction. She therefore concludes:

Proverbs' understanding of male-female relationships, then, both socio-logically (mother-father and, especially, husband-wife) and imaginatively (Wisdom-seeker of Wisdom) exhibits a high degree of equality between the two (Camp 1985:82).

I think Camp tends to exaggerate the degree of equality between males and females in the book of Proverbs. For example, in the texts where father and mother appears as pairs in the nurturing of children they do not seem to reflect such a high degree of equality as she suggests. The father or אב in such pairs always starts a line of verse (stich) while the mother or אמה always follows. The father's form of instruction is always the מוסר (authoritative instruction/discipline, cf McKane 1970:268) which is never applied to the mother; hers is the הוראה (teaching) which is also never applied to the father. Gaspar (1947:136) observes that the contrast between the work of the father (מוסר discipline) and that of the mother (הוראה teaching) is worthy of note and may be aimed at depicting the mother's gentler nature in the raising of children.

Noteworthy is the fact that in 4:3-4 only the מצוות (commandments) of the father are mentioned. Even with regard to the issue of husband-wife relationship as we will note in our exegesis of Proverbs 31:10-31, we may not speak of a high degree of equality.

Though we cannot underestimate the significant role the mother played in the education or socialisation of the young (both male and female; cf Meyers 1988:149-154) it may not be viewed as an indication of the high degree of equality between fathers and mothers in the book of Proverbs.

Another female image predominantly notable in the book of Proverbs is that of wife. The following section will focus on this image.

## 2. THE IMAGE OF WIFE IN PROVERBS

Bird (1974:57) notes that in the book of Proverbs, the wife is depicted in a more varied and ambivalent light. The 'good' wife, a 'woman of quality', is described as the crown of her husband (literally, 'master') and she is contrasted with the wife 'who brings shame', that is, the one who degrades rather than enhances the reputation of her husband (12:4). She is also described as prudent (19:14) and gracious (11:16), with honour as her gain (11:16). Such a wife is deemed God's gift (cf also Swidler 1979:124). The preceding description of the image of a wife in Proverbs reminds us of Fontaine's (1992:142) argument that in the book of Proverbs, the positive and negative roles of women are viewed basically from the viewpoint of what they provide for the men involved. If this is true, we may again question Camp's (1985:82) contention that there is a high degree of equality between husbands and wives in this book.

Camp (1985:84) observes that two images of wife recur frequently throughout the biblical literature: the wife as manager of the household, and the wife as counsellor to her husband.

a. *The wife : manager of household affairs*

With regard to the wife as manager of the household, we recall the interrelatedness between the themes, woman, household and Wisdom in the book of Proverbs. The  $\text{אִשָּׁה חַיִּל}$  of Proverbs 31:10-31 is the perfect example of the wife as manager of the household in which she lives. According to Fontaine (1991:161) the manifold competences which required mastery in order to run the household successfully enhances the perception of her Wisdom (Pr 31:10-31). Woman Wisdom, as we have noted, invites people to her house while Woman Stranger lures them to hers.

The issue of women as managers of households in which they live is not uniquely Israelite; it is a universal phenomenon. Traditionally women have been tied to the domestic sphere, therefore, the power they exercised in that sphere is not to be wondered at. Hence, as was argued, it is always problematic to speak about the oppression of women as if the latter have no power at all. Power they have, though it is not always legitimated.

b. *The counsellor wife*

The authority gained by a wife from the efficient management of her household could also be translated into her ability to influence her husband in the spheres in which he had authority to make decisions. The wife could serve as a counsellor to her husband (Camp 1985:86). Camp (1985:90) argues:

All female figures in the book of Proverbs give advice of some sort, whether it is the nagging of the contentious wife, the seduction of the strange woman, the wisdom of the woman of worth or the truth and justice of personified Wisdom.

Camp (1985) further notes that the family imagery interlocks in Proverbs 1-9 in an illuminating yet wholly unpredictable way: it is only to be expected that a young man, when grown up, will want to stick to the same qualities in a wife that he found in his parents (mother). One of the wife's functions is to preserve the young man from the strange/foreign woman. 'Beyond that, however, she is his confidante and advisor, one who helps create and, in turn, shares in their mutual success' (Camp 1985:95).

In the same way, the אִשָּׁה חַיִּל of 31:10-31 is the advisor of her husband for she 'opens her mouth in wisdom' (Pr 31:26).

As we have noted with Bird (1974:57), the book of Proverbs depicts a wife in a more ambivalent light. Wives are not only viewed positively as the above information seems to suggest, the book also describes a 'bad wife' though not as a general type. Bird (1974:58) argues that a bad wife is identified basically in terms of a single trait - contentiousness. The contentious woman is likened to a 'continual dripping on a rainy day' (19:13). It is better to live in a desert land or in the 'attic' than to share a house with her (21:9, 19; 25:25 so Swidler 1979:127). The bad one is described as 'one who causes shame' (12:4), who disgraces not only herself but her husband. The latter point according to Bird, is the main point of admonition. From the preceding information, one is tempted to imply that an Israelite view of a good wife was that of the one who acts in silence and subordination; the one who will not challenge her husband's views for doing the latter, would probably qualify her as being contentious and thus as being bad. It is a pity that the picture of the woman given in the book of Proverbs is from a male point of view. If women had had an opportunity to share in the writing of the book, we would probably

have a different picture of a woman. For example, what men describe as contentiousness might be viewed differently by women.

Bird (1974:58) notes that in only one passage in Proverbs, the wife is described as a sexual partner. In 5:5-19, the counsel to fidelity contrasts the wife of one's youth with the 'loose woman', the husband is advised to 'drink water from (his) own cistern' and not to let his streams flow for others (vss 15-16; cf Sir 26:19-21). The text portrays an ideal of sexual pleasure identified with marriage, and the form of marriage presumed here is monogamous. It is amazing that a book like Proverbs, which is so replete with female images, is devoid of the 'obvious' characteristics of married women in ancient Israel: wives as sexual partners and mothers as child-bearers. Does this imply that we are here dealing with literary rather than real women or were these 'ordinary' traits of women so obvious that the sages did not see it fit to reflect on them?

The counsel to fidelity is paralleled by the admonition to guard against the seductions of the 'other/foreign (strange)' woman. We now turn to one of the major types of references to women in the book of Proverbs - the 'other/foreign' woman.

### 3. THE 'OTHER/FOREIGN' WOMAN

The 'other/foreign' woman is the most common word about women in the instruction literature (2:16; 5:3-6; 5:20; 6:24; 7:5; 2:14; 23:27-28; cf 31:3; Eccl 7:26; 'harlot': 7:10-23; 29:3). The Revised Standard Version characterises her as a 'loose woman' or 'adventuress'. As Bird (1974:82) observes, the Hebrew word **זָרָה** used in most of these passages simply means 'stranger' or 'foreigner'. Only in 7:10-22 and 29:3 is the professional term **זָנָה** (harlot) used.



According to Camp (1985:113), in Israel, prostitution was a liminal state, a 'betwixt and between condition' which was institutionalised and also categorised. Harlots were marginally acceptable as long as they were no man's virgin daughter and no man's wife. As Niditch (1979:144, quoted by Camp 1985:113) notes, a young Israelite wife was allowed two proper roles: an unmarried virgin in the home of her father, and a faithful, child producing wife in her husband's or husband's family's home.

From all sides then, women's sexual lives appear to have been controlled by patriarchal social order; at home by their fathers and in their families (if they happen to get married) by their husbands. According to Bird (1974:58), a 'loose woman' or 'adventuress' is depicted as luring men to destruction (2:16; 5:3; cf 7:22; 9:18; 22:14; 23:29) by her smooth talk (2:16; 5:3; 6:24; 7:15; cf 7:21). She accosts her victim in the squares and marketplace and lies in wait at the street corners to entice him into her house (7:12; 9:14-15).

Commenting on the strange woman of Proverbs 2, Camp (1991:26) argues:

In sum, it is difficult to construe this particular text as representing anything other than an Israelite wife who is faithless to her husband. The issue at stake here is not marriage to the proper wife or even faithfulness to one's wife. Rather, the issue is social control of women's sexual behaviour.

Camp (1991:27) further observes that neither Proverbs 2 nor 7 (texts on the strange woman) attempt to describe the actions of a particular real woman. The language of deviant sexual behaviour is being used symbolically but not as a mere cipher for deviant worship. Rather, it symbolises forces deemed destructive of patriarchal control of family, property as well as society.

Because control of women's sexuality is a *sine qua non* of the patriarchal family, it is no accident that the forces of "chaos" are embodied in a woman who takes control of her own sexuality (Camp 1991:27).

The loose woman in Proverbs personifies 'folly'. This woman is contrasted with the 'wise woman' or 'wisdom' personified (9:1-6, 13-18); at the same time association with harlots and love of wisdom describes antithetical behaviour (29:3). Throughout the admonitions, runs the idea that wisdom will protect a man from the disaster the loose woman portends (Bird 1974:59).

Two references to an adulteress are notable. In 6:26, she is compared with the harlot. In 30:20 the adulteress is portrayed as an amoral woman who will not admit her guilt: 'she eats, wipes her mouth, and says, "I have done no wrong"' (Bird 1974:59).

Camp (1985:114) maintains that the adulteress (no less the adulterer) unlike the harlot was absolutely intolerable in Israelite society for the threat to the social structure which was dependant on the family's stability was absolute. Wright (1979:124) argues:

The sage relates the domestic aspect of adultery to the wider concern of the whole community and its enjoyment of God's gift of the land. The fact that he does so indicates strongly that here too, as in other areas of the OT, the household was seen to be the primary locus for the individual of the obligations and privileges of the national relationship with God, and the basis on which his membership of the community rested.

Though Camp (1985:114) notes that adultery (both by a man or a woman) was intolerable in Israel as it affected the wider society, it is interesting to note that here in Proverbs, stress is on the adulteress. As Fontaine (1992:146) observes, nowhere do we hear the sages condemn a society that forces some women into prostitution, one hears only warnings about the havoc such women can wreak on a young man's promising career. The negative portrayal of women in 1-9 (as strange/loose women) may give one an

impression that they were the basic force behind adultery, and hence a basic force causing chaos and death to Israelite society. Once again, the portrait as we have it is that of a male in a patriarchal society writing about women. One suspects that this strong language about women may be one of the indications that women were powerful forces to reckon with at the time. Perhaps this is what has prompted Bird (1974:60) to conclude:

Women are not chattel in Proverbs, nor are they simply sexual objects; they are persons of intelligence and will, who, from the male's point of view expressed here, either make (cf Woman Wisdom, good wife and Woman of Worth) or break (cf loose woman and other/strange woman) a man (brackets mine).

Having got a glimpse of the images of women in the book of Proverbs, we may now grapple with the purpose these images served in their socio-historical setting. Why was female imagery significant in the post-exilic setting?

#### **G. PROVERBS' IMAGE OF WOMEN IN A POST-EXILIC CONTEXT**

Camp (1985:250) argues that in the book of Proverbs, more clearly than anywhere else, we are able to note the resurgence of the socio-religious significance of the family.

Two major issues were pertinent for the returned exiles according to Camp (1991:17-18):

- a. There was a need for a functional family household for the accomplishment of the tasks of survival in rebuilding society and clear evidence of family identity was needed to establish claims to land and political power in a divided and contentious community (cf also Camp 1985:239-242).
- b. There was a need to promulgate pure and proper worship of YHWH, unadulterated by foreign cultic practice.

These two issues were closely linked and did reach moments of crisis for some members of the *Golah* married into foreign families. Indeed, foreign marriage as Camp (1991:18) notes, not only brought the danger of foreign gods, it also threatened the stability of the authority structure.

The book's direct support of the integrity of the individual family contributes to its indirect support of the community's covenant relationship with God - the book's significant function as part of Israel's authoritative literature (Camp 1985:251).

The final level of redaction notable in 1:6; 6:20; 23:22-25 and 31:10-31, which all include the mother's instruction along with the father or even instruction by the mother (cf 31:1-9), is the familial setting. The instructors/sages had as one of their clear goals, the inculcation of family values as the foundation for a workable social organisation.

Camp (1985:253) then concludes:

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

To that end, the redactor of the book of Proverbs has not merely stressed family imagery but specifically, female imagery. Camp (1985:258-261) notes an increased status of women in this period as a result of the following factors (amongst others):

- a. Projects of rebuilding houses, the temple and the walls as well as buildings of Jerusalem called for the involvement of both men and women.
- b. As men had to be involved in the guerrilla attacks organised by Sanballat the Samaritan (Neh 4:10-12), women would have to work harder in the tasks of building and food production (cf Meyers 1983:576-582).

According to Camp (1985:259) the fact that women are explicitly included as members of the covenantal community and worshipping congregation, along with men (cf Neh 1:2-3; Lev 13:29, 38) also bears witness to their improved status. Camp (1985:260) speculates that with the autonomy and decision-making authority flowing back to the collocation of families from the ruined central power structure (monarchy/kingship), the community-wide authority of women as managers of their household would also increase.

We may connect this fact with the one already noted of the woman as household manager, in a previous discussion. It is understandable that with the restoration (or even renewed) significance attached to the family, and the woman as the traditional household manager, plus the alleged increased status of women during this time, the redactor of the book of Proverbs would have elevated not just family imagery but female imagery. The efficient management of the family by the woman would have led to the stability of the family, an invaluable commodity for a family in this period. It thus becomes significant that not only the father but also the mother, the traditional nurturer of children in the family (cf Fontaine 1990:161) also becomes foregrounded as the teacher of children. Proper education of children would also affect the family's stability.

With the family as the point of focus, it becomes reasonable that the book (which was written by males and male-oriented) would have emphasised 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. In this private sphere of the home, women (cf the Woman of Worth) could use their power to effect changes even in the sphere which was viewed as manly (the public sphere).

The image of a foreign (strange) woman of Chapters 1-9 also becomes clearer in this post-exilic setting. Whatever they stand for, whether strangers to Israelite traditions (foreigners or non-Israelites) who would obviously tamper with the pure worship of YHWH, or others, that is harlots or adulteresses (women other than legitimate wives),

strange women would tamper with the stability of the Israelite family household. For example, once the wife is an adulteress, her covenantal (as well as the family's) relationship with YHWH would be disturbed and the family's stability plus the whole nation's stability would be disturbed - a situation which they would not have allowed during this period.

With regard to Woman Stranger as depicted in Proverbs 7, Camp (1991:29) argues that we are not confronting a social reality of wanton wives but rather a socio-psychological reality of men who were threatened by a multiple stressed situation which included internal religio-political power struggles, economically oppressive foreign rule as well as the pressures of cultural assimilation. It might be worthwhile to comment further on the situation of multiple stresses which according to Camp (1991), included internal religio-political power struggles, being ruled by an economically oppressive foreign power and the pressures of cultural assimilation which threatened Israelite men during the post-exilic period. According to Camp (1991) these were projected onto the symbol of a woman - Woman Stranger. According to some scholars (cf Washington 1994; Camp 1991) Woman Stranger as portrayed in Proverbs 1-9 is a multivalent symbol. Woman Stranger represents various issues. Washington (1994:229) remarks: 'Because of the composite nature of her portrait, the proscribed figure has no consistent identity, and sexual slur is only the most prominent of a variety of tactics used to disparage her'.

Even the biblical Hebrew adjective זָרָה appears to be vague for it denotes 'otherness', that is, what is outside a field of recognition or of legitimacy (cf Washington 1994:229). The question is: Who were these 'others'/'foreigners' who are symbolised by the metaphor of Woman Stranger? Does the metaphor refer to real women who were foreigners to Israel (for example Moabites, Ammonites)? Is it referring to Israelite women who were leading lives foreign to Israelite traditions? Is it referring Jews who were considered by others as not true Jews? I wish to pursue the last question.

Recent scholarship on the book of Proverbs has agreed that there was a tension between the returnees from exile, who formed the Temple community, and who therefore believed that they were the true Jews, and those who remained in the land, who are sometimes called ‘peoples of the land’ (cf Horsley, 1991; Washington 1994; Eskenazi & Judd 1994). Washington’s (1994) comment in this regard is worthy of note:

By referring to the local non-גלל יהודה Judaeans as “peoples of the land(s)”, the returning exiles effectively classified their Judaeans rivals, together with the neighbouring non-Judaeans peoples (Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, residents of Samaria, etc), as alien to Israel (Washington 1994:232-233).

It was the leaders of the post-exilic community who, through their administration of the genealogical registry, had a decisive influence in the debate over the identity of the true Israel in defining who would belong to its temple and who would possess its land (Washington 1994:234-235).

Coupled with the issue of the land tenure system and real property holdings of the Judaeans collective, was the threat of marriage to foreign wives, wives who were not true Jews. Such a fear was caused by the fact that within the patrilineal land tenure system, women were capable of inheriting and disposing of property (cf the case of Zelophehad’s daughters in Num 27:1-11; 36:1-9). Hence marriage to foreign women could entitle the non-Jews to the Jewish heritage. Ezra-Nehemiah’s marriage reforms become understandable when viewed against this background (cf Camp 1985; Eskenazi & Judd 1994; Washington 1994). We are therefore faced with a situation where a combination of socio-economic, socio-political as well as socio-religious forces are projected onto a female figure - WOMAN STRANGER.

Given the canonical context of Proverbs 31:10-31 in relation to Proverbs 1-9, how should we understand the Woman of Worth (who may be paralleled with Woman Wisdom as

against Woman Stranger) in the light of the identity crisis of the time? I propose two answers:

- a. If we understand the Woman of Worth to represent an ideal type of woman that every *true* Israelite man had to strive for, we may assume that the portrait of the Woman of Worth was indirectly meant to warn Israelite men against foreign women (whatever foreign stands for), this would include those women who were not regarded as true Jews. Such an assumption reveals the androcentricity of Proverbs 31:10-31 - a text from the hands of 'true' Jewish men who desired to have 'true Jewish women' to maintain amongst others, ideological purity.
- b. If we understand the Woman of Worth to be a symbol of wisdom, we may assume that the poem served the purpose of revealing that a true Jew was one who possessed Wisdom, wisdom which in the book of Proverbs (particularly in 1-9) is equated with the fear of Yahweh. In this case, a true Jew would be one who respected Yahweh - hence the religious overtones. This second explanation I would argue, accommodates everybody - both women and men.

An interesting question might be: How does an African biblical hermeneut respond to the identity crisis allegedly addressed by these texts of Proverbs? There appear to be striking parallels between the situation in Israel during the early post-exilic period and the colonial period in South Africa. The returnees, as we noted, found people (fellow Jews and others) in the land and claimed superiority over them, even to the extent of determining who the true Jews were. The overpowered people thus became strangers in their own land. The same situation was faced by Africans in South Africa. As we noted, colonists came into the land and annexed territories, disowning the native inhabitants of their land, relegating them to so-called homelands or Bantustans and even defining their identity for them. A *true* South African was a White person; the native inhabitants of the land only came to be recognised as true South Africans after the first democratic elections of 1994.



Such painful parallels between the biblical text and a particular historical situation may serve to alienate people with an unfortunate history, like Black South Africans, from the Bible.

A final comment about women in the post-exilic setting will be in order: My observation is that, in this period of Israelite history, women were a powerful threat to the kyriarchal status quo. On the one hand, marriages with women who were deemed foreign (symbolised by Woman Stranger) could disrupt the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-religious lives of the 'true' Jews and ultimately of the whole nation because a family is a basic unit of each society. The emphasis on good and bad women and the book's ending with a poem in praise of an ideal woman thus makes sense in this context. Men had to strive for the ideal (whatever it stood for) to maintain the status quo.

Camp's theory (1985:263) of the resurgence of the family, not only as the primary socio-economic unit but also as a locus of the manifestation of God's blessings as grounds for the foregrounding of female imagery (women) in the book of Proverbs, makes sense in this context. Indeed, one cannot fail to question why an androcentric text from a patriarchal culture has a tendency of 'elevating' females - even to the extent of defining Woman Wisdom as the daughter of YHWH! (cf Pr 8). We must however, as we argued with Camp previously, be careful of too easily embracing patriarchy's definition of success! Does the fact that the book of Proverbs foreground female imagery (wives, mothers, Woman Wisdom) imply the elevated status of these figures? Does the fact that father and mother appear as pairs in texts dealing with their role in the education of children imply that the mother's status is increased? From whose viewpoint are these female figures portrayed? Whose interests was the portrayal of these female figures aimed to satisfy? Such questions are necessitated by a hermeneutics of suspicion with which, as we have noted, feminists/women liberation scholars approach the text with a view to unmasking whatever ideological bias the text might have.

The following section will hopefully address these questions.

Having located Proverbs 31:10-31 within its immediate canonical setting and its socio-historical setting, we now turn to the exegesis of the text. How was the text interpreted in the past?

## H. A FEMINIST READING OF PROVERBS 31:10-31

### I. INTRODUCTION

As was noted in the introductory sections of the present chapter, White male scholarship has had the luxury of controlling knowledge through the years and hence much of what has been written on our poem has been done by white males from their point of view. It will not benefit the present research much to repeat what has been done by this scholarship here. For views of these scholars on the poem, the reader is referred to the many commentaries on the book of Proverbs (cf McKane 1970; Ringgren 1947; Scott 1965; Toy 1977; Whybray 1972). This does not, however, imply that their works will be totally discarded, where necessary, they will be incorporated.

My intention in this section, is to give a *feminist reading* of the poem in line with the nature of the present research whose clients are women. How have women read this text in the past? According to a feminist point of view, what type of woman is portrayed in the poem about the Woman of Worth? Is she liberated/independent or subordinated?

The material that follows comes basically from the hands of White women. To my knowledge, Black/African feminists have not written anything on the poem.

Due to the recentness of scholarship by women in the Bible or in theology there is little written on the poem from women's perspectives. Another possible cause is that in

Western (particularly US) biblical scholarship, books on the Writings (in particular the book of Proverbs) have not been as popularly received as have the other books of the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. EXEGESIS OF PROVERBS 31:10-31 FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

What emerges clearly as one reads the poem is that the **אִשָּׁה חַיִּל** in the poem under scrutiny is the manager of a household. She skilfully and righteously manages all aspects of a complex household directing the members of the household in their various responsibilities. The **אִשָּׁה חַיִּל** takes part in the actual physical labour involved in different household tasks, particularly that of textile production. She is in charge of the household's acquisition of property and participates in the market economy of the day. Through all these functions, she provides moral leadership for the members of her domain (Meyers 1991:48).

Camp (1985:92) is indeed right when she notes: 'The woman is not simply the maintainer of a household but the source of its identity'.

The woman defines and identifies the house in a manner analogous to the more usual reference to the **בֵּית אָב** (house of father) - refer to the repeated reference of **בֵּיתָהּ** (her household, vss 21 and 27). This however, does not imply that the house no longer belonged to the man or father, it only shows the power she had with regard to household activities.

### *Proverbs 31:10-12*

In verse 10, a key phrase **אִשָּׁה חַיִּל**, appears, with which the poem has come to be identified. Fontaine (1992:151) says that the words which are usually translated 'a

capable', 'perfect' or 'good' wife literally mean 'a woman of worth' for the term for 'woman' and 'wife' is the same in Hebrew.

חַיִל (worth) is a term more often applied to men in the phrase usually translated 'mighty man' (אִישׁ חַיִל) and denotes persons at the height of their powers and capacities. According to Toy (1977:243), the word חַיִל of women, is used only four times in the Old Testament (cf Ruth 3:11; Pr 12:4; 31:10-27). Bird (1974:59) notes that in the urban, monogamous and relatively comfortable milieu assumed by the book of Proverbs, a man's success depends on listening to his parents' instruction and obtaining a good wife.

It is not surprising therefore, to observe that the rhetorical question on how difficult it is to find a good wife introduces the paean of Proverbs 31:10-31: אִשָּׁה חַיִל מִי יִמְצָא - A woman of worth, who can find? Fontaine (1988:516) observes that this opening question of how unlikely sages considered the prospect of finding a woman of worth is not surprising due to their general (negative) view of women (cf 11:22; 21:9, 19; 22:14). The Woman of Worth is said to be more precious than jewels מִמַּפְּיָנִים:31:10; NEB: 'coral'; JB: 'pearls') - language directly recalling Woman Wisdom in 3:15 and 8:11 (Fontaine 1988:51; Camp 1985:188).

Camp (1985:101) argues that the concluding poem about the Woman of Worth in chapter 31 allows the material benefits flowing from one's love of and success in finding wisdom to be interpreted in terms of the benefits of human love and the marital relationship. The one who succeeds in finding the אִשָּׁה חַיִל does not lack material goods (שֶׁלֶל-v11), which reminds us of those who find Woman Wisdom and are therefore materially rewarded (3:13-14; 8:17; Fontaine 1988:516; Camp 1985:188).

The husband's enthusiasm can be appreciated for he 'will derive no little profit from her. Advantage and not hurt will she bring him all the days of her life' (Pr 31:11-12; Swidler

1979: 125-126). Indeed, as Carmody (1989:73) observes: 'This wife is not property, but she is a good investment. With her as a helpmate, a husband will get a good return'.

Verse 11, to my view sheds light on the selfish nature of human beings. They always want to benefit from others. They hardly ever ask how they can benefit others, even if they happen to be in a better position than those from whom they want to benefit. Even in our text an elite *man*, from a *rich* setting still contemplates how he can enrich himself by finding a Woman of Worth, not an ordinary or even poor one, but an unobtainable ideal such as the woman portrayed in the present text. Her gift of 'good' (טוב) to her husband recalls 18:22 in which the one who finds a wife finds good and receives favour from YHWH. According to Swidler (1979:126) it is no wonder that the Woman of Worth is appreciated, for she is the model for the 'Perfect Servant'.

### *Proverbs 31:13-19*

The Woman of Worth is no sluggard. Even though her household is equipped with servants, she works hard (vss 14-15; 17-18). As the manager of the household, she directs the work of servants and sees to it that her family is well catered for with food and clothing (Fontaine 1988:516; Harris 1993:31; Bird 1974:57-48).

Carmody (1989:73) remarks:

The ideal wife is busy, efficient and productive. She probably would be a demon of energy, and the implication is that she cares for her family's every need.

Note should also be taken that the servants of our אֲשֶׁר חַיִּל נְעָר are no ordinary servants. The Hebrew word נְעָר means a young male of high birth. Like the French *garçon*, the Hebrew נְעָר is frequently a person, more often than not a young person, in domestic

service which was not menial but one of definite responsibility. His sister, נערה (this word is used in our present text) heads the household domestics or is a lady in waiting (MacDonald 1976:147-148, 170). Our אשה חיל thus, is no ordinary woman. She engages in the typical tasks of spinning, weaving and sowing - woman's work of paramount significance in the ancient world (vss 13, 19; Fontaine 1988:512; so Carmody 1989:72).

Verse 16 appears to indicate that she engages at least in some activities that are usually reserved for men, like the purchase of real estate. Fontaine (1988:516) finds this outward movement of the Woman of Worth into the public domain not surprising, and argues that historically there is evidence to suggest that extremely high (and extremely low) status women have always had more freedom to participate in the public domain. Ruether (1995b) <sup>14</sup> however, observes that the situation portrayed in the paean is that of a pre-industrial society in which the household economy formed part of the household (so Waegeman 1989:103); consequently women, as managers of the household participated in its economy. She therefore finds the woman portrayed in 31:10-31 in a better position than her modern counterpart, for the latter still has limitations in participating in the productive sphere which has now moved to the public domain and since the Industrial Revolution, has been in the hands of the powerful of society.

Camp (1987:54) argues that women's territories, as depicted in the poems on Woman Wisdom and that of the Woman of Worth, are not restricted to the home. The Woman of Worth performs duties necessary for the maintenance and *shalom* of her household and she goes forth into the world to deliberately engage on investments and in commerce. According to her, Woman Wisdom as a root metaphor finds its source in the traditional place of women's power - 'the house'. Far from 'keeping women in the house, however, it holds forth the woman-identified house as the source of society's identity and power' (Camp 1987:55). This reframing of the meaning of the house from the current tendency

to despise it - by making it private and separating it from the public domain, is valuable because:

- a. it affirms those women, such as Northern Sotho women I suggest, and increasingly those men, who choose the house as a primary setting for creating and realising their human potential.
- b. equally importantly, it reminds those who choose the public arena in which to exercise their power of this arena's reason for being, which is the support and protection of the '*shalom*' and love, known first or often not at all, in the household of the wise woman(Camp 1987:55).

I hope to revisit the views of Camp regarding the household as a source of power when I deal with an Afrocentric reading of Proverbs 31:10-31 in the next chapter.

### ***Proverbs 31:20-27***

The 'provider' motif (v 21-22, 24-25) continues, interspersed with a description of her wise, righteous and compassionate actions.

The plight of the poor is one of the themes that the sages address in the book of Proverbs. It is interesting to note with Fontaine (1990:106) that the proverbs on the plight of the poor and the wealth of the rich often expose the greed and cruelty of the very class to which we assume the sages must have belonged. We may thus assume that the sages had a sense of justice; hence their portrayal of a woman who, though very rich, comes down to the level of the poor.

Several clues about her richness emerge from the text:

- a. The fact that she has servants in her charge, high quality servants as we have noted.
- b. The fact that her household is clothed in scarlet (v 21). McKane (1970:669) holds that the word ‘scarlet’ indicates the very best, the clothing of kings. It is the quality of the clothes they wear which keeps them warm. The woman also has a magnificent wardrobe made up of fine linen and purple (v 22); this is surely a bourgeois woman!
- c. She buys a field after consideration. Not every woman in Israel, particularly in the light of hard early post-exilic conditions, could afford to buy a field.

What is empowering, particularly for the marginalised people, about this upper class woman, is that she is not an ivory tower; she comes down to the level of the people. In South African Black rhetoric, she would possibly be dubbed ‘the people’s אִשָּׁת חַיִל’.

As Crook (1954:138) observes: ‘The Woman of Worth would appear to antedate the fat “kine of Bashan”, as the rich women of Samaria were described by Amos. *Far from oppressing the poor, she shows concern for their welfare*’ (vs 20; my emphasis).

Due to her good character and her provision for her household, her husband is ‘known in the gates’ (בַּשַּׁעֲרִים). The gates (cf McKane 1970:669) of the town are the places of assembly where deliberations of public concern occur, where legal and political matters are settled.

The industry of the Woman of Worth enhances the status of her husband to the extent that he is respected at the city gates. Many feminists appear to be dissatisfied with this state of affairs condemning the אִשָּׁת חַיִל for living to enhance male interest (cf Brenner 1993:129; Swidler 1979:126; Carmody 1989:72). What is at issue here is the claim that the woman is confined to the despised sphere, the home, and works labouriously to enhance the interests of the husband who alone had the right to ‘sit at the gates’, to



participate in the public sphere (cf Brenner 1993:129; Carmody 1989:72). Carmody (1989), for example, argues that much of the status of the Woman of Worth seems auxiliary, the text implies that her hard work supports her husband's more public affairs. One would have some reservations with such an interpretation:

- a. As we have noted in the previous discussion, the אִשָּׁה חַיִּל of our text is not limited to the household; she goes out and buys a field, she engages in business transactions, thus she is also engaged in public affairs.
- b. The husband's 'sitting at the gates' may not necessarily imply that he was just included as part of the assembly purely by accident of his sex; surely, he must have worked hard to deserve to be counted among those 'sitting at the gates'. The poem in no way shows that the woman contributed to his 'sitting at the gates'; it only shows that, through her diligence and effective management of the household, she earns him respect at the gates where he already is.
- c. Lastly, we have clearly noted with Camp (1987) that the household from which Woman Wisdom and the Woman of Worth operate, is actually a source of power. Because of the wisdom and power of those operating from the house, the public sphere or 'the gates' flourish. Brenner (1993:129) is indeed correct when she argues:

Her voice might indeed be muted within the public culture she shares, a predominantly male culture. This is partly explained by her sitting at home while her menfolk pass their time in public places (at the gates). She lives to advance male interests and male well being. *In so doing, however, she ultimately subverts the male order by becoming its focal point and essential requisite* (my emphasis).

From verse 26, we may suggest that the Woman of Worth is a wise teacher. She does not speak indiscriminately, she opens her mouth with wisdom. Due to her wisdom, she plays the role of counsellor-wife to her husband.

The faithful instruction חסר תורת on her tongue, may imply that like the mother figure in Proverbs (cf the preceding section), she has participated in the education of her children.

Camp (1985:92) views this poem as part of an intellectual process in which Israelite thinkers moved from a type of real person (a thinking person and legitimate counsellor to her husband) to different narrative images of the counsellor wife (some with good and some with bad advice, just as human wisdom is in general, and also to an idealised portrait of a wise wife in an ideal household in an ideal society). 'She represents a brand of wisdom that is associated with good family life which, in the eyes of the poet, is unmistakably and eternally good' (Camp 1985:92).

### *Proverbs 31:28-31*

The woman's single-minded devotion to the needs of others earns her in verses 28-30, the praise of those for whom she lives. Swidler (1979:126) would call the latter, men: 'In return for her complete sacrifice she is given praise by men: "Her sons stand up and proclaim her blessed, her husband too sings her praises" (31:28), and those men gathered at the city gates - "let the works tell her praises at the city gates" (31:31)'.

The word בניה (her children / sons) may not necessarily be rendered 'son' as in בני ישראל (children of Israel). Swidler appears to be overreacting when she claims that the אשת חיל is praised only by men.

Whatever the meaning is, 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 in those who are 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.

According to Fontaine (1988:516) 'woman who fears YHWH' (v 30), may originally have read 'a woman of understanding' as it appears in the LXX. The change might have been made by the final redactor to distinguish this woman from Woman Wisdom who appears as understanding (cf Camp 1985:96-97).

Fontaine (1988:516) notes that within the context of this paean, the effect of such a statement is to suggest that women in the community, for whom this text is 'Scripture' most probably worship God through fulfilment of their domestic roles<sup>15</sup> rather than through forms of observance (like public/religious leadership which men assign to themselves).

Some commentators (Crook 1954:137) have suggested that the phrase **יְהוָה יִרְאֶה** fear of the Lord (v 30) is a late emendation by the redactors who wanted to give the poem a sacred tone. The latter would then overshadow the secular tone of the activities of the Woman of Worth. This argument might make sense in the context of a culture whose outlook on life acknowledges dichotomies in life; soul and body, sacred and secular, et cetera. An Israelite outlook, just like an African one, is holistic; there is no dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. Both groups believe that there is an order (a religious one), set by God for Israel, and the ancestors for Africa, to which people should adhere. Failure to submit to its demands leads to punishment and adherence to it leads to reward (cf Masenya 1989:6-7). The implication of the preceding statement is: for a typical Israelite or a typical African, when anything goes wrong in any sphere of life, the person(s) has (have) not satisfied the demands of the order and thus God or the ancestors are not happy. For example, if the Israelites do not fare well in a war, they attribute that to failure in their covenantal relationship with YHWH; likewise if children in a particular Northern Sotho family do not make progress in their education, it may be assumed that

the ancestors are not happy - hence the integration of all the spheres of life in a unified whole.

Whybray (1994:156) seems to be endorsing the same view when he holds that the critique that verse 30 is not appropriate in a poem wholly concerned with practical activities, arises from a mistaken view that sacred and secular were two separate spheres in the thought of the ancient world. In this poem, the 'ideal wife' is praised almost entirely for her practical achievements but '... such "wisdom" and the "fear of Yahweh" are constantly presented in the book of Proverbs as closely associated: in fact, true wisdom is the fear of Yahweh' (Whybray 1994:156). By wisdom kings reign (8:15), by wisdom riches and prosperity are attained (8:18).

In 31:10-31, the ideal wife is presented as a "wise woman" in that sense, whose practical ability is derived from her religious commitment (Whybray 1994:156).

Perhaps what Whybray says might be connected with the view by Fontaine (1988:516) (noted earlier) that in a Jewish society, women's domestic activities, like caring for children and for the sick and practising acts of hospitality were viewed as sacred (so Schaalman 1995).

Worthy of note in the first stich of verse 30 is that we have, according to Wolters (1988:451), an unexpected image of a woman:

שֶׁקֶר הַחַן (the charm is deception)  
וְהַבֵּל הַיָּפִי (and the beauty perishes)

He holds that the erotic is usually included in songs about women in the Ancient Near East, it may even play an important role in them, but this is not the case here (so Brenner 1993:129).

Carmody (1989:73) would find the portrayal of the beauty of a woman in this text problematic. She argues that the author imputes a fear of beauty. According to her, that is not necessary, beauty is a gift of God and it must be praised. The question is: is the author imputing that beauty is to be feared, or is he concerned with priorities; beauty or fear of the Lord? The latter would obviously be given priority in line with the spirit of the whole book - the fear of the Lord **יִרְאַת יְהוָה** is the beginning of knowledge (1:17).

One other factor - which contributes to this unexpected image of this woman is that the Woman of Worth is characterised in wholly non-sexual terms; the sexual attributes of the wife are not mentioned (Bird 1974:58; so Brenner 1993:129).

The element of motherhood in the sense of mother as child-bearer, I suppose, as we have previously noted with Camp (1985) is also missing in this poem. Children are mentioned in passing in verse 28. In verse 26, we are tempted to make the assumption that her **תּוֹרַת חֶסֶד** (teaching of faithfulness) is probably given to her children. It is not explicitly stated (like for example in 1:8; 4:3-4) that she, as the traditional nurturer of children in Israel, is teaching her children. The **אִשָּׁת חַיִל** then I suggest, is not a mother in the true sense of the Israelite understanding of the word.

Such unexpected images of the Woman of Worth tempts one to question this portrait: Are we dealing here with the portrait of a real woman or is it idealised? Is the poem praising a woman or is she used as a metaphor for something else? Indeed with their poetic licence, poets can say what they want in different and sometimes highly obscure ways.

According to Fontaine (1988:516), the command to provide for the Woman of Worth (cf v31a) suggests that, although she is the source of all good things, she may not automatically have received a share in the profits of her own labour. That may make sense in a patriarchal, patrilineal milieu in which emphasis was on the father (male) figure and the father's house. Even though the poem presents the Woman of Worth as the

manager of household activities, the head of the household (her בעל vss 11, 23) or master, is her husband. Hence, everything (including the produce of the woman from the fields) and everybody would have been in his charge.

Verse 31 attests to the fact that woman's work maintains not only her own household but larger society as well for the works of the Woman of Worth 'praise her in the gates', the place epitomising the just social order in Israel.

Thus we see that the "proper place" of Woman Wisdom is in the world of human relationships, both public and private. Indeed, the division so apparent in modern society between the private domain of the house and the public domain of work and government is denied, as is the right of a depersonalised external sphere to define the true nature of social organisation under God (Camp 1987:55).

Camp (1985:189) observes that, just as Wisdom takes her stand and cries out in the gates (1:21; 8:3), so also the works of the Woman of Worth praise her there (31:31; so Fontaine 1988:516).

By way of concluding the section on the feminist reading of Proverbs 31:10-31, I wish to highlight certain key issues in feminist biblical circles and investigate how these ideas affect their reading of Proverbs 31:10-31. These issues are: power and authority; the division between the private sphere and the public sphere, and a critique of patriarchy.

I must however, indicate that my investigation into how these ideas affect the feminist reading of Proverbs 31:10-31 is likely to be limited as the feminists who have re-read 31:10-31 do not necessarily focus directly on these issues in relation to Proverbs 31:10-31.

## **I. KEY ISSUES IN CIRCLES OF FEMINIST BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP**

### **1. POWER AND AUTHORITY**

Power, influence and authority refer to certain forms of human relationships. These phenomena, therefore, exist only in a plural setting where two or more people interact with each other. Possibly because our language is choked with a plethora of nouns rather than verbs, we tend to view power especially as something concrete, something an individual can possess like a fast car or a lot of money (Bell 1975:17). Unfortunately, power does not have a verb form, which partly accounts for the frequent tendency to see it as a mysterious property or agency resident in a person.

According to Bell (1975:17) what is really meant by the assertion: 'A possesses power' is that A 'possesses' the potential for exercising power in an effective way. Fewell and Gunn (1993:15) also maintain that the term power describes the social relationships or structures through which people - whether individuals or groups - control or dominate, or inspire and sustain. Power then can be positive and productive as well as negative and repressive.

Just like power, authority is not something that can literally be held, though the symbols of authority are in most cases quite tangible. Bell (1975:18) argues:

Authority is a relationship between a superordinate and one or more subordinates, which, when “activated” by communication, leads to compliance with “orders” or “commands” issued from above.

Rosaldo (1974:21) observes that the distinction between power and legitimated authority (authority made legitimate), between the ability to gain compliance and the recognition that it is right, is crucial to our study of women. It is necessary to note that while authority legitimates the use of power, it does not exhaust it and actual methods of giving rewards, controlling information, exerting pressure as well as shaping events may be as available to men as they are to women. Thus, in acknowledging the universal fact of male authority, we are not denying the importance of women.

From what Rosaldo says in the preceding lines, we note that women scholars distinguish between the power (or the potential to exercise power, cf Bell above) that women have, though it is not legitimated, and the legitimated authority that men have in a patriarchal society.

Fewell and Gunn (1993:15) observe: ‘People can have power without having authority, that is they may still find ways of effecting change despite oppressive structures that militate against their interest. Power, then, exists on a continuum’ (cf also Collier 1974:89-96).

According to Rosaldo (1974:32) women defy the ideals of the male order. They may be defined as virgins, yet be necessary to the group’s regeneration; excluded from authority, yet exercise all sorts of indirect power; their status may be derived from their male relations, yet they outlive their husbands and their fathers. In as far as their presence introduces such contradictions, they will be seen as anomalous and defined as dangerous, dirty and polluting and as something to be set apart.



When this issue of power and authority is applied to the Woman of Worth of our text, we may come up with the following observation:

The **אִשָּׁה חַיִּל** has the potential to exercise power. She actually exercises her power as household manager so efficiently that her influence is also felt even outside the house (her husband is known at the gates). However, due to the socio-cultural setting of a patriarchal society, legitimated authority seems to belong to the man. The word for husband used in this text (cf vss 11, 23) **בַּעַל** (master or owner) shows that we are dealing here with an androcentric text. As Camp (1985:91) argues: 'It is almost ironic that the poet consistently employs the word "ba 'al" for her husband (31:11, 23, 28), rather than 'is, given the way in which the woman is depicted'. In describing the character of the rule of the 'ba 'al', Pedersen (1926:63) argues that he is not an isolated despot but the source of strength and will for the entire sphere which belongs to him and to which he belongs. Patriarchal society gives males legitimate authority over all spheres of life including the family. Though the **אִשָּׁה חַיִּל** of our text is highly productive and obviously needs to be given the reward she has earned, the latter point does not seem to be obvious from the text: **הֲנוּ לָהּ מִפְרֵי יָדֶיהָ** (Give her a share in the fruit of her hand). As Fontaine (1988:517) has noted, the command to provide for her in 31:31a, suggests that, despite the fact that she is the source of all good things, she may not have automatically shared in the profits of her labour. In a patriarchal society, as we have previously argued, males would have had control also over the produce of the labours of their wives (cf 31:28-31 above).

## 2. THE DIVISION BETWEEN THE PRIVATE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERES

One of the key issues in White feminist circles is the sharp division that exists between the private sphere and the public sphere, a division which relegates women to the home or the private sphere, a sphere which society, as we have observed, with Camp (1987:55), has '... the current tendency to demean it (the house) ....' The public sphere, it is argued,

has '... the current tendency to demean it (the house) ....' The public sphere, it is argued, is reserved for those who benefit from the patriarchal status quo - men. What is disturbing is that the value of productivity does not necessarily depend on **what** is done, it depends on **where** it is done and by **whom** it is done. What is done in the public sphere (by men in patriarchal society) is more valued than that which is done in the domestic (private) sphere of women.

The word 'domestic' refers to the minimal institutions and the modes of activity organised immediately around one or more mothers and their children, while 'public' refers to activities, institutions and forms of association that link, rank, organise or subsume particular mother-child groups. This organisation provides a universal framework for conceptualising the activities of the sexes (Rosaldo 1974:23).

Setel (1985:37) observes that in contrast to the perceived disparity among various spheres of existence (eg material versus spiritual, emotional versus rational, private versus public), feminism posits a world view which sees significance in connection and relationship rather than in contrast and separation.

For Rosaldo (1974:41) I suggest, this connection and relationship that Setel (1985) talks about can be realised if there can be mutuality and complementarity between men and women in the domestic sphere. She argues: 'An egalitarian ethos seems possible to the extent that men take on a domestic role'. Ruether (1993:227) seems to be endorsing the same view when she argues that the split between home and work, women's work and men's work, is overcome by reintegrating them in a community that both raises its children jointly and owns and manages its own means of production.

On the other hand, Rosaldo (1974:41) notes that women gain power and a sense of value when they are in a position to transcend domestic limits, either by entering the world of men (public sphere) or by creating a society for themselves.

How does this issue of the division between the public sphere versus the private sphere relate to the feminist understanding of Proverbs 31:10-31? Feminists react differently on the issue of the division between the public and the private sphere in relation to 31:10-31. There are those who do not see any division of spheres in this text.

Ruether<sup>16</sup> (cf preceding discussion) observes that the text portrays a situation of a pre-industrial era in which the economy of the family formed part of the household (cf Waegeman 1989:103). The situation however changed with the advent of the Industrial Revolution which removed the economy from the home to the state with unfortunate consequences for women who could no longer manage the household economy. Ruether thus finds the situation of the Woman of Worth better than that of her modern counterpart.

On the other hand, there are scholars who acknowledge that though Proverbs 31:10-31 reflects a division between the private sphere of the **אִשָּׁה חַיִּל** and the **בְּשַׁעְרֵי**, gates of the city, the Woman of Worth subverts the patriarchal order by becoming its central point and essential requisite (Brenner 1993:129). She further argues that though the Woman of Worth appears to be succumbing to the patriarchal order, she is actually the ultimate winner.

We noted with Camp (1987:55-56) that the house of the Woman of Worth is not to be despised, its influence is felt even at the city gates for the husband is respected at the gates because of her labours. She therefore notes: 'Indeed, the division so apparent in modern society between the private domain of house and the public domain of work and government is denied ...' (Camp 1987:55).

Carmody (1988:73) however, seems to suggest that the sphere relegated to the woman, the home, is secondary. She contends: 'On the other hand, much of her status seems

auxiliary. The text implies that her diligence supports her husband's more public affairs  
.... ?

At the other extreme Ann Harris (1993:31), a Jewish lawyer and the wife of a Rabbi, feels that, just like Israelite women of old, the integrity and industry of Jewish women in securing family and communal life are of utmost significance. She argues: 'The strong home life for which we in the Jewish tradition are universally recognised and admired cannot be allowed to disintegrate among the devastating statistics of divorce'. As she concludes her article, she appeals to her menfolk to also deem it necessary to support their womenfolk with regard to the devotion to the family.

The preceding discussion on how the matter of the division between the public and the private spheres shapes the feminists' reading of 31:10-31 shows that feminists (as we have noted in the previous chapters) do not always approach the biblical text in the same way.

The following section will focus on the last issue which always informs the feminists' reading of the text: A critique of patriarchy.

### 3. A CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY

As has been noted, feminists approach the biblical text with a hermeneutics of suspicion for they maintain that the text was produced in patriarchal cultures by males. One of the aims with which they read the text is that of unmasking the androcentric ideology which might exist in it.

Many feminists (as we have noted in the section on the authorship of the book of Proverbs and 31:10-31) would argue that 31:10-31 serves the interests of patriarchy. Fontaine (1992:146) observes:

As always in male-centred Scripture, the positive and negative roles of women are viewed primarily from the perspective of what they provide for the men involved (cf also Fontaine 1988:516).<sup>17</sup>

Feminists also criticise the status of the Woman of Worth of our poem. Some feel that she is not independent. She is viewed in terms of her provisions for her husband and children. This claim has come to light in the preceding quotation (cf also Swidler 1979; Weems 1995;<sup>18</sup> Braude 1995). Anne Braude,<sup>19</sup> a Jewish feminist scholar, feels that the Woman of Worth was good for her own time; Braude thus identifies with her for her own time but not for today. She cannot be Braude's role model because she is viewed in terms of her relationship with her family (husband and children). Thus she cannot exist in society in her own right. This is definitely in contrast to the view held by Harris (1993), a fellow Jewish sister noted above.

There are those who see some ambivalence in the portrait of the Woman of Worth in 31:10-31. She appears to be powerful and independent while on the other hand she is defined in terms of her family - husband and children (Carmody 1988:72; Camp 1995). According to Camp (1995) the poem can be read either to empower women or to oppress them.

For Ruether<sup>20</sup> (1995) on the one hand, Proverbs 31:10-31, gives a picture that is paternalistic. As it is, the poem does not liberate anybody. On the other hand, Waegeman (1989) and Lyons (1987) argue that the Woman of Worth is powerful and independent.

Whatever option they take in their reading of the poem, feminists seem to agree that the present text, like many Old Testament texts, did not escape the hands of patriarchal ideology. The extent of the impact of this ideology in the text differs from one feminist to another.

It might be worthwhile, by way of concluding the present section, to have a picture of the feminist analysis of the לִי אִשָּׁה נְכוּנָה: Is the Woman of Worth a real woman or do we have in this text, an idealised picture? Many scholars seem to be arguing the latter. The Woman of Worth, according to these scholars, is an idealised picture (cf Camp 1985; Fontaine 1988; Lyons 1987; Crook 1954). Camp (1985:90) notes: 'The poem on the Woman of Worth, 31:10-31, presents us with a portrait of a wise wife which is on the one hand concrete and vivid while at the same time idealized'.

Others seem to be interpreting the Woman of Worth as a real woman (Carmody 1988; Harris 1993; Swidler 1979; Waegeman 1989).

Camp (1985) and Fontaine (1988) see connections between the Woman of Worth and Woman Wisdom. Camp (1985:93) for example holds that the female figure in Proverbs 31 is not simply an ideal portrait of some man's dream woman, through the crystallised vision of the finer qualities of a real woman - this figure represents a universal type of wisdom.

In her book *Wisdom and the feminine in the book of Proverbs*, Camp (1985) has argued that the female figures in the book of Proverbs are not just literary forms; they should be tied to a certain socio-historical setting. She observes:

Literary and religious forms do not arise and live in a vacuum. People give to these forms meaning which is born of their experience, even as the forms in turn shape that experience. Therefore a full interpretation of the figure of female Wisdom can and should try to describe a possible historical and sociological locus where such a figure could give and receive meaning.

The preceding argument also came to light in my telephone conversation with her (1995-04-05) as she commented on Proverbs 31:10-31. She argued that the poem presents an idealised picture of the woman. It is an acrostic literary conceit which is highly stylised,

however; it cannot be totally removed from the historical context of its writing. The poem could not have been written if it had been completely removed from reality. Camp's analysis here is significant for the present research and I hope to revisit it in the next chapter as I read our paean from the viewpoint of a Northern Sotho woman.

## **J. A SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 3**

Three key issues were dealt with in this chapter; some aspects of the historical-critical study of Proverbs 31:10-31 in the book of Proverbs including the dating of the book (poem), its readership and the relationship between Proverbs 31:10-31 and its immediate canonical setting. A post-exilic date and setting for the whole book including Proverbs 31:10-31 were posited.

The author(s)/redactor(s) and his/their readers are elite males and they appear to serve male interests as can be expected. The information for the male elite redactor(s) and readers also applies to 31:10-31. The latter then comes from the world of elite men. This fact is also reinforced by the picture of the woman portrayed here.

The second key issue addressed by the present chapter concerns the images of women in the book of Proverbs and how they fit into the book's socio-historical setting. Three main images were identified: mother, wife and 'foreign/other' woman. These images were then explained in the context of a post-exilic society.

The last key issue, which also forms the core of the chapter, is the feminist exegesis of Proverbs 31:10-31. The researcher preferred to break away from the monotony of previous male oriented commentaries to a reading by women or women-identified men. That does not mean that relevant information from previous commentaries could not be incorporated. This move was also prompted by the nature of the present research which set great store by feminist/womanist/ woman's liberation approaches. By way of

concluding this last section, the various feminist assessments of the Woman of Worth were given.

In the next chapter, I propose a new approach for reading Old Testament texts from the perspective of African women in South Africa. After introducing the approach, I will re-read Proverbs 31:10-31 from this perspective.



## K. END NOTES

1. Efforts have been made (cf the Midrash) for example, to understand these names in the light of Israelite traditions (cf Plaut 1961:299, 310). The LXX for example, does not translate Lemuel as a proper name (cf Fontaine 1988:515; Scott 1965:184).
2. Refer also to Whybray (1994:163-165) for the difficulty of dating the different parts of the book.
3. See also Crook (1954:137-140), who dates the poem in a pre-exilic setting.
4. Telephone conversation with Professor I J Mosala, 1995-07-03.
5. Confer also Newsom (1989:142-159) in her article dealing with 'Woman and patriarchal wisdom: a study of Proverbs 1-9'.
6. This issue of an Instruction by a woman is viewed as an exception by some scholars (see Fontaine 1988:515; Whybray 1972:180; Murphy 1981:81), a point still reinforcing the view that the authorship of the book as a whole is male.
7. Though she does not specifically focus on the book of Proverbs, what she says is similar to the views of some feminists about the portrayal of women in Proverbs (cf Fontaine 1988; Newsom 1989; Carmody 1988) as she also re-reads some of the texts from the book of Proverbs.
8. She also noted the same point in our telephone conversation of April 1995.
9. McCreesh (1985:25-46) is another scholar who, in my view succeeds in showing the resemblances between these two sections of the book.
10. For more information on the connections between 1-9; 10:1-31:9 and 31:10-31, see Camp (1985:191-208).
11. The order of the Hebrew verses notable in the LXX is as follows:  
31:1-9; 25:1-28; 26:1-28; 27:1-27; 28:1-29; 29:1-27; 31:10-31 (cf Lichtenstein 1982).
12. For more details on chiasma and symmetry in the two poems, see Lichtenstein's article (1982:203-211).

13. This fact was noted by Claudia Camp in our telephone conversation of 1995-04-05.
14. Personal conversation of 1995-05-03 with R R Ruether, Evanston.
15. This fact also came to the fore in my discussion of the poem with Rabbi H E Schaalman. He noted that the 'confinement' of Jewish women to the home and their involvement with domestic activities like motherhood, acts of hospitality was a form of participation in the sacred rather than subordination to men.
16. Personal conversation of 1995-05-03, Evanston.
17. On the issue of the androcentric nature of 31:10-31, see also Swidler (1979:125-126).
18. Telephone conversation - Evanston.
19. Personal conversation of 1995-04-10, Evanston.
20. Personal conversation of 1995-05-03, Evanston.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **AN AFRICAN WOMAN'S LIBERATION READING OF PROVERBS 31:10-31**

#### **A. FEMINISM, WOMANISM OR SOMETHING ELSE?**

##### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In chapter one of this research, I noted that I prefer not to call the approach which I will use to read the key text of this essay, feminist or womanist and that I hope to coin a term which I deem suitable for the present research.

As I have already argued, I avoid the word feminism because its agenda is basically different from mine. Its focus is more on gender asymmetry than on other forms of oppressions like classism and racism. This is more in line with feminists' context as white women; a context which has privileged them over Black women due to their skin colour.

In South African society with its apartheid ideology, one wonders whether it will be possible for the 'madams' (White women) to practice genuine feminism with the 'maids' (Black women) given our past history.

##### **2. AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMINISM/WOMANISM**

Black feminist scholars (cf Hudson-Weems 1993; Bell Hooks 1981) maintain that feminism is racist in origin. Feminism, it is claimed, originated as a result of the racist attitudes of White American women who could not accommodate the fact that their

menfolk were so sexist that they gave African-American men voting rights before their own womenfolk.

Due to these differences between White women's agenda and that of the African women (that is, women both in the African continent and in the Diaspora), Clenora Hudson-Weems (1993) calls upon all African women to rename themselves and reclaim what belongs to them. She suggests that African women call themselves, womanists. In her book *Africana womanism, reclaiming ourselves* (1993), she elaborates on the differences between feminism and womanism and also gives the characteristics of a womanist. On encountering the book for the first time, coupled with previous observations of the close resemblances between the African-American context and that of an African woman in South Africa, I quickly embraced the term 'womanism' for an African South African woman's liberation framework of the Bible. Hence in my article 'African womanist hermeneutics: A suppressed voice from South Africa speaks' (1995a), I suggested that as African women in South Africa, we could appropriate the term womanism<sup>1</sup> rather than feminism for our woman's liberation framework. A few examples of our similarities are noteworthy:

- a. We are all Africans and our framework must be African-oriented.
- b. We experience multiple forms of oppression, like racism, sexism and classism.

### 3. DIFFERENCES IN CONTEXTS

Though we have basic points of resemblance, there are differences as well:

- a. African-Americans experienced a history of slavery while Africans in South Africa experienced a history of colonialism and apartheid.

- b. They were moved out of their mother country and thus lost touch with the rich cultural heritage of Africa while we are still in Africa. Even though we were conditioned by society to look down upon our African heritage, we fortunately still have it. We can still revive the beautiful elements of our culture. This is one of the aspects I wish to include in the new approach I wish to develop.
- c. African Americans are a minority in the midst of Whites and are thus highly Westernised (though Womanists make a conscious effort to accommodate their African-ness in their hermeneutical endeavours), while Africans in South Africa are in the majority with a few Whites who, unfortunately due to the apartheid policy, managed to take almost full control over us, even influencing us to idolise the Western culture and learning to show no appreciation for our African-ness (Masenya 1995e:4).
- d. Interestingly, womanism is a term that is originally and uniquely African-American, that is, it was coined as a response to the African-American context<sup>2</sup>. Its origins also bear witness to this fact. The term womanist was coined by Alice Walker and it comes from 'womanish' (opposite of 'girlish', ie frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A womanist is a black feminist or feminist of colour. The term can also refer to a woman who loves other women (sexually and or non-sexually). She sometimes loves individual men, sexually and or non-sexually. A womanist is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people (Walker 1983: xi).

According to Castelli et al (1995:226), a womanist reading emerges from African-American women's encounters with the text and is shaped by a consciousness deriving from the particular struggles many African-American women have faced, including struggles with (and sometimes against) forms of feminism that have elided or suppressed the differences that exist among women of various classes, races and ethnicities.

As a result of these differences, and in line with my unique context, I propose to coin a new word. I propose an African woman's liberation reading of the text. This approach will take into account the African-ness of an African woman in South Africa. This is necessary in a setting where the African culture has been denigrated. The introduction of Christianity to the country, as we observed, was coupled with the demonisation of the African culture and the idolisation of the Western one. With this approach, I hope to revive the elements of African culture which elevate the status of women and to criticise the oppressive elements. An approach such as this, fits in harmoniously into the post-apartheid South Africa with its emphasis on the democratic rights of individuals. This new approach seems to be in line with Brueggemann's characterisation of our new intellectual situation. According to him, knowledge is contextual; the contexts are localised and this knowledge is inherently pluralistic. The last point is worthy of note:

... knowledge is inherently pluralistic, a cacophony of claims, each of which rings true to its own advocates. Indeed pluralism is the only alternative to objectivism once the dominant centre is no longer able to impose its view and to silence by force all alternative or dissenting opinions (Brueggemann 1993:9).

What I am trying to imply is that my new approach is local, focusing on the South African situation. It is contextual, for it focuses on the context of African women in South Africa as well as the context of the biblical text under discussion, and more importantly, in the context of the rainbow nation of South Africa and the new democratic situation, it acknowledges that knowledge is pluralistic. The researcher therefore acknowledges that there might be other biblical approaches used by other persons to effectively grapple with their situations. Hence my approach is one among many which are there (cf feminist approaches) or might be there in future. My advocacy, thus, is to listen carefully to others.

Let us call this concept **Bosadi** which in my opinion should presuppose ideal womanhood in the Northern Sotho context (Masenya 1995c:5).

## **B. A BOSADI PERSPECTIVE OR APPROACH**

### **1. EXPLANATORY REMARKS**

The Northern Sotho word *bosadi* (womanhood) is an abstract noun from the word '*mosadi*' which means woman, married woman, wife (cf Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1975:1154; so Brown<sup>3</sup> 1979:217). The word *mosadi* comes from the root - *sadi* which has to do with womanhood; *bosadi* for example may be translated as 'womanhood' or 'private parts of a woman'.

I have purposefully avoided the term *mosadi* as a key word for my perspective for the following reason: Depending on the context, the word *mosadi* can be used in a derogatory sense, which reveals the bias the Northern Sotho culture has against women as in the following usage: If a man is referred to as *mosadi*, it shows that he is despised in one way or other. However, the same word *mosadi* may be used for praising or uplifting a woman as in: *O mosadi!* Literally, you are a woman, meaning you deserve praises, you have acted in a womanly (*sesadi*) way!

On the other hand, the word *Bosadi* describes what it means to be a woman in the Northern Sotho culture. In this research, the word *mosadi* will mean 'woman' and not necessarily a married woman or wife, for in my view not every woman in society is a wife, therefore girls as well as boys, should be freed from marrying if they choose not to marry.

## 2. BOSADI IS A COMPREHENSIVE PERSPECTIVE

The present approach will focus on the following aspects amongst others,

### a. *Bosadi and positive elements of African culture*

It will revive the positive elements (liberatory aspects) of the African culture regarding women. Such a foregrounding of the positive elements of the African culture stems from the fact that every culture has both negative and positive elements and it is sufficient for its people as long as it satisfies their needs. A revival is also necessitated by the fact that the culture has previously been denigrated as I have already argued. The present post-apartheid South Africa strives for the realisation of the rights of everybody, freedom for all, freedom to associate with any culture, religion, ideology to name but a few.

Some aspects of the African culture which this perspective will highlight are noteworthy:

### i. *Bosadi and ubuntu/botho*

According to Teffo (1995:14) *ubuntu* or 'humanness' implies a fundamental respect for human nature as a whole. It is a social ethic, a unifying vision enshrined in the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye (motho ke motho ka batho* - Northern Sotho version) which means that a person is a person through others. African humanism is typified by the following norms and values: justice, respect for person and property, tolerance, compassion and sensitivity to the aged, the physically challenged and the less privileged, reliability, et cetera.



The notion expressed in the maxim 'I am because we are' (so Mbiti 1989:106) highlights the communal/corporeal mentality of Africans. If such communality is incorporated in women's liberation approaches, it will hopefully neutralise the individualism of Western feminist approaches. Such a communality, in my view, implies that the struggle for the liberation of African women should be a joint effort by both men and women (cf also Okure 1992:77) for, as we noted in the first chapter, if a part of humanity is oppressed, all of humanity is oppressed. I suggest that, African men in South Africa, more than anyone else, should be more understanding and sympathetic towards the plight of fellow African women, for they know what it means to be marginalised on account of something God has given them, something they cannot change - race. Likewise, as women, we cannot change our femaleness; indeed we do not need to! Our full rights as persons in our own right have to be acknowledged.

*Ubuntu*, in my view has to be a joint effort by both African men and women. Our past history has shown that the Northern Sotho culture expects much from a woman - perseverance, patience, loving kindness - all of which constitute *ubuntu/botho*. These qualities are expected from women. Bam (1992:364) notes that women have been socialised to be caring, loving, very patient and to be in a position to tolerate just about anything. In the same way, Oduyoye (1994:174) commends about a woman in the Akan tribe: '... a woman is a symbol of bountifulness, tenderness and severity. She is a symbol of protection, charm, and fidelity in love'. She then asks a significant question: 'What then becomes of the humanity (*ubuntu/botho*) of a man who does not participate in his "woman-beingness"?' (brackets mine).

## ii. *Bosadi and the significance of the family*

Where necessary, the concept *Bosadi* elevates the significance of the family. The latter has played and still plays a significant role in Africa (cf Mbiti 1989:104-106). While one

is aware that the family has been used to subordinate women (cf Camp 1987:56; Hooks 1984:36-37), the significance of sound family relationships for society as a whole cannot be overemphasised.

b. *Bosadi and oppressive elements of African culture*

The *Bosadi* approach will criticise the oppressive elements of the African culture. It presupposes that the African culture was sexist even before colonialism. The latter only served to reinforce the androcentricity of the African culture. In this regard, Oduyoye (1994:173) observes:

It is too easy to lay blame solely at the feet of Westernization. We know that within the African religio-cultural heritage is to be found the seeds of the objectification and marginalization of women. Colonial policies simply helped the process along, and it succeeded to the extent that it was advantageous for African men.

c. *Bosadi and other oppressive forces*

The *Bosadi* concept takes note of the interplay of oppressive forces such as racism, sexism, classism and the African culture as factors shaping the way a Northern Sotho woman reads the Bible. This approach, as in the feminist and/or the womanist approaches, observes that there is no value-free interpretation of the Bible, hence as has been argued, its clients are African women at the bottom of the kyriarchal ladder. As we have noted in the previous chapters, such women will read the Bible differently from other readers. South African readers include African men who benefit from patriarchy, White men who benefit from both patriarchy and racism and White women who benefit from racism. Though we are in a non-racist and non-sexist South Africa, the

repercussions of apartheid will still be felt in the decades to come, African women at the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid suffer the most (cf Masenya 1995a:151).

These oppressive elements will not only be considered in the context of the life of an African woman, but where possible they will be identified in the biblical text. Unlike Western feminist approaches (cf also African feminist approaches) with their emphasis on the androcentricity of the biblical text, the *Bosadi* approach will go further and identify other oppressive elements in the text; for example, the class of people whose interests the text serves, and the class of the author of the text.<sup>4</sup> I have already applied this class analysis when dealing with some aspects of the historical-critical study of the book of Proverbs in the preceding chapter.

Related to the issue of classism in biblical texts, is the issue of those deemed foreigners (to Israel's traditions) in the Old Testament. Such people at the margins of society, defined by their otherness, also attract my attention as a Northern Sotho person who has been historically marginalised by my otherness - otherness of race, tribe, sex and class. Where applicable, such otherness/foreignness in the biblical text will be looked at.

Some African scholars (cf Felder 1991; Tema<sup>5</sup> 1995) have been interested in tracing texts dealing with Africans. Where possible, the *Bosadi* concept will highlight the significance of Africa's influence on the biblical text.

Coupled with this issue is the apparent resemblances between the Old Testament/Israelite world view and the African world view (cf Masenya 1989). Where necessary the *Bosadi* concept will highlight these resemblances with a view to making a Northern Sotho woman, particularly a Christian (New Testament oriented one), comfortable with the Old Testament too. Such an interest in the context of the reader and of the text reveals that for the present researcher both contexts, that is the one that produced the text (cf historical-

critical approaches) and that of the readers (reception criticism and contextual approaches) are significant. An overdose of one approach, may cripple our end product. On the one hand, an overdose of a historical-critical study of the text leaves us with a text which is an ivory tower, isolated from the real lives of the people. On the other hand, an overdose of contextual approaches leaves us with all sorts of eisegesis, convenient interpretations which are in most cases miles away from the intention of the original authors. If we are comfortable with such interpretations we might as well forget about scientific studies of the Bible because in our attempt to make the Bible relevant to our context by unmasking the biases it might have, we are also found guilty of bringing our biases into the Bible. Therefore, just as we do not want the Bible text to manipulate us by, for example, its androcentrism or classism, we must also be careful not to manipulate the Bible. This is what Habermas' communicative action entails - an open dialogue between conversation partners in which neither of the parties coerces the other, for, if this occurs, communication becomes distorted and we may never hope to have an emancipated society (cf Guess 1984:55-75). In spite of Habermassean ideals, we know that everyday conversation is distorted. In our conversation with biblical texts, particularly those of us who have been marginalised by these texts, we must be open and not allow our anger and frustrations to shape our way of reading them. Our openness may help us to identify liberative aspects of the text, for, as I have argued in chapter one, the Bible is both oppressor and liberator. Such liberative aspects are empowering and life giving for African women in South Africa. These texts bear witness to the fact that God continues to speak to them through the Bible even in twentieth century post-apartheid South Africa.

In the light of what has been said in the preceding paragraph under point c, we may thus conclude that the *Bosadi* concept is a critical approach towards the Bible text and its context as well as the context of the reader. The words of James Martin (1987:379-380) regarding the common characteristics between the feminist, post-Holocaust and

liberationist hermeneutical systems and a holistic hermeneutics which is a post-critical paradigm, appear to be relevant for the *Bosadi* concept:

They (these systems) employ a systematic structural analysis of an interpretive complexity comprising text, interpreters, context; all in their societal, political and psychological reality (Martin 1987:379-380) (brackets mine).

It is worthwhile noting that as part of the analysis of the context of the interpreter, a *Bosadi* approach will also bring to light the significance of the faith element in the life of an African woman in her encounter with the Bible. This faith aspect (cf also Bosch 1991; Ukopong 1995) may not be omitted because, for an average, Northern Sotho Christian woman, the Bible is not a book for critical scholarly arguments as we noted in chapter one of this research; it is regarded as the Word of God capable of transforming life and addressing her different situations through her faith in the Christ proclaimed in the Bible (cf section D (3) in chapter two). Her faith in Christ is thus one of the main reasons why the Bible is so important for her.

It is with this *Bosadi* liberation approach that I intend reading Proverbs 31:10-31 within my context. Before I re-read this text, it might benefit us, for the purposes of the present research, to get a picture of how women are portrayed in Northern Sotho proverbs. I have chosen the proverb genre in particular, in line with the Hebrew book of Proverbs on which the present research is based.

In the previous chapter, we analysed images of women as they appear in the book of Proverbs with a view to getting a better picture of the Woman of Worth of Proverbs 31:10-31. It might be worthwhile in the present chapter to get a portrait of how women are viewed in the Northern Sotho/African culture. This portrait will then be analysed

from a *Bosadi* critical perspective. This analysis will help us in our re-reading of Proverbs 31:10-31.

### **C. PORTRAITS OF WOMEN IN SOME NORTHERN SOTHO AND OTHER AFRICAN PROVERBS**

Though the present section will specifically focus on how women are portrayed in the Northern Sotho proverbs, I will also cite relevant proverbs from other African tribes, in South Africa or elsewhere on the African continent. This will hopefully help to give us a glimpse of what it means to be an African woman though I am not unaware of the problems of generalisations regarding African women.

The information that follows does not exhaust *all* that Northern Sotho proverbs have to say or say about women. I do not claim to know all Northern Sotho proverbs dealing with women; some of the proverbs do not appear in the written collections. Fortunately, I have used one of the oldest and most commonly used collections of Northern Sotho proverbs by J R D Rakoma. The above title of the sub-heading, bears witness to this limitation.

The proverbs of any culture portray the wisdom as well as the world view of the members of the culture concerned. This is also the case with Northern Sotho proverbs. Proverbs also shed light on the context from which they originated. For more information on these aspects of proverb study, refer to my MA dissertation (1989) 'In the School of Wisdom: An interpretation of some Old Testament proverbs in a Northern Sotho context', University of South Africa, Pretoria.

We may therefore anticipate that the information in the following pages on images of women in Northern Sotho proverbs will reveal something of the wisdom of the Northern Sothos about *bosadi* (womanhood). What does it mean to be a woman in this culture? Which expectations does Northern Sotho society have about ideal womanhood? Which role(s) do(es) a woman play in this culture? What is her status in relation to men or her male counterparts?

## 1. IMAGES OF WOMEN IN THE NORTHERN SOTHO PROVERBS

I was disappointed when I went through Rakoma's collection *Marema-ka-Dika tša Sesotho sa Leboa* to note that there are very few proverbs dealing with women per se. In many proverbs, a woman can be implied from the word *motswadi* (parent). In these proverbs, her role in the education of her children and also as a force shaping children's lives can be implied. Implied in the sense that in most cases Rakoma (1971) uses the word *motswadi* (parent) or *batswadi* (parents) in his texts. The word in its singular form, can refer to either of the two parents. However, with the Northern Sotho culture's emphasis on the motherhood role of a woman, we may speculate that in such proverbs, the parent who plays a significant role in the nurturing (education) of the children, is the mother.

Another disturbing observation is that in this collection, only six proverbs specifically mention the word *mosadi* (woman) and then they refer to woman only. However, there are fifteen proverbs which mention the word *monna* (man/male) but their implied referents are not always men (males); they sometimes refer to all people as in the following proverbs<sup>6</sup>:

*Monna ga a hloke maaka*, literally: A man does not lack lies. The underlying meaning of this text is that there are no perfect people in life, something bad can always be said

about anyone. *Monna ge e se rrago o dula ka wena*, literally: If a man is not your father, he uses you for a seat (he sits through you). The underlying meaning of the proverb is that if a child stays with someone other than his/her parent (guardian), the latter will handle the child in a cruel way to the extent that the child might consider leaving his/her company.

The implication of the above is clear: persons other than *monna* (man) that is, boys, girls and women must see themselves included in the word *monna*. The general tenor of these proverbs suggests that in this culture, normative humanity is male - adult male. On the other hand, proverbs mentioning the word '*mosadi*' always refer to woman and nobody else. A man cannot see himself included in the word '*mosadi*' but a *mosadi* must see herself included in the word '*monna*' which is sometimes used as a metaphor for 'human being' as we have noted in the above proverbs. Was this irregularity a Western (English) influence (man-woman issue) or was it influenced by the biblical myth of creation (Gn 2)? The answer is a definite *no* to both questions. Our observation here endorses the view I have always had (refer to the preceding chapters): The African culture was sexist even before colonialism, the latter only helped to 'help a limping animal climb the mountain' - *e klotša wa e nametša thaba*. This proverb suggests that a specific action has merely exacerbated the situation. In this context it would imply that colonialism only helped to reinforce the sexism of the androcentric African culture.

From these proverbs, the following images of women appear either directly or indirectly:

a. *Women as mothers*

In the Northern Sotho culture, as in many societies, both matrilineal and patrilineal, a woman is basically valued as a mother. Though there are very few proverbs which deal



with women as mothers, this role can be implied, as noted previously, from the many proverbs that deal with the care parents (*batswadi*) should give to their children, the discipline they must give to them, and the significance of the parents' influence in the lives of the children.<sup>7</sup>

In everyday Northern Sotho culture, a barren woman caused great concern. Measures are taken to address her barrenness. The following proverb brings this to light: *Teng ga kgomo ga go hlobogwe*, literally: Do not give up on the stomach of a cow. The meaning of this proverb is as follows: If a woman does not bear a child, she must not be designated as barren; she must be taken to traditional doctors to be attended to so that she will be able to have children like other women (Rakoma 1971:219).

In some other African tribes, marriage cannot be considered complete without children (cf Mbiti 1989:107). Krige (1956:62) notes that among the Zulus, marriage is considered complete only after the birth of a child. The first child, particularly a boy is very important to this group. The last point also holds good for the Northern Sotho patrilineal family groups.

Commenting on the conceptions of the functions of the role of women in Ghanaian proverbs, Amoah (1995:5-6) observes that women are basically conceived as life-givers and their motherhood role is emphasised.

The following proverb throws light on the preceding fact:

*Ena yie* (Motherhood is supreme)

Oduyoye (1995:45) makes an interesting observation about the obsession of the Yoruba people with childbearing: 'The Yoruba culture, a patrilineal group, is so obsessed with having children that tales even tell of men becoming pregnant'.

The preceding information reveals that Northern Sothos, like their fellow Africans elsewhere, set great store by children as the following proverbs will show:

*Go tswala ke go feka maano*: To give birth is to devise plans. Meaning: It is a blessing to have one's own children for they will take care of one in old age and in other times of need (Rakoma 1971:133).

*O kgalemetše Morwa' Ngwato-a-šiko, mpheng wa robega selepe se tlo šala*: congratulations son of Ngwato-a-šiko! If the handle (of the axe) breaks, the axe will remain, meaning: children carry on the line and take care of parents in old age, hence it is a blessing to have them.

Northern Sotho women also feel the satisfaction of fulfilling the motherhood role as the following proverb reveals:

*Mosadi a hlaletša ngwana bolwetši bo a fola*: Once a woman rocks a child, her illness gets healed. Tenor of the proverb: Once a woman delivers a child, she becomes so excited to the extent of forgetting about her troubles and problems. Even if she still has problems, she will be able to cope with them for she will be so satisfied with the gift of a child.

A reaction such as this is understandable in a cultural setting where a woman's status is defined amongst others, by her ability to be a mother. No room is provided for women who may choose to lead a childless life, neither is room given for women or men who cannot bear children naturally. Marriage in a typical Northern Sotho context, could not be allowed to continue without children, for example, one would scarcely find a couple who have reached old age without having children: Either the man could opt for polygyny (cf also Oduyoye 1994:169; Mbiti 1989:139) or if it was discovered that a man was infertile, a woman could be encouraged to have sexual relations with somebody outside

the marriage, preferably her husband's next of kin. Even in cases of the death of a husband, someone from the husband's lineage would be expected to carry on the line of the husband in this culture.

As Tribble (1978:133-134) has observed, children have a tendency to empower women in the sense that you need them if you are to be valued (by cultures such as the Northern Sotho one). They also tend to be a subordinating factor in the sense that, if you do not have them, you are not as highly valued as one who has them. I would change this formulation slightly to indicate that there is nothing wrong with children, what is wrong is society's view about certain roles ascribed to certain individuals. While there is nothing wrong with childbearing and motherhood per se, there is definitely something wrong with the idolisation of the two. At the same time, a word of caution particularly to foreigners to the African culture(s) is in order: Before we pass judgement on certain practices within these cultures, for example, Africa's emphasis on the role of women as mothers, we must investigate the reasons or philosophical grounds behind such practices.

Mbiti (1989) and Oduyoye (1994) observe that child-bearing is one of the sacred activities in African culture. According to Oduyoye (1995:63-64), in the matrilineal Asante culture, if a woman is childless, they assume that the fault is the husband's (in the patrilineal Northern Sotho culture the first suspect is the woman) and they will not allow their daughter to serve a man who cannot enable her to fulfil her role as the channel by which the ancestors in the spirit-realm return to join the clan in this realm. Elsewhere Oduyoye (1994:169) argues: 'For Africans, every newborn baby is an ancestor returned. This belief in reincarnating one's forbears is seen in the principles underlying the naming of newborns'.

This belief in reincarnation of one's forbears is also found in the Northern Sotho culture. Hence the significance of naming in this culture. Names of children are mostly taken from the father's family.

Mbiti (1989:131) also observes that for Africans, it is significant that there should be children in marriage so that they shall remember their parents when they shall have joined the living dead. If there are no children born to a marriage, there will be no one to remember them.

Such considerations may hopefully rectify certain misconceptions by Westerners about us. One such misconception is worthy of note:

Westerners often see the African woman as a beast of burden walking behind her husband, carrying his children, one inside, one on her back, and many more following in a long procession of children whom she brings forth from puberty to menopause. She is clearly an inferior creature to the Western woman, a person at the bottom of the human pecking order (Oduyoye 1995:78).

b. *Women as wives*

In the proverbs that mention the word *mosadi*, one scarcely learns anything about how she is expected to behave as a wife. This is amazing because in traditional Northern Sotho culture, the woman's role as somebody's wife is so important and basic that one can hardly find a spinster anywhere. It looks as if it is a given that a woman can only become fully woman, that is an ideal woman, after marriage. It appears society had a stereotype that a woman cannot live on her own, independent of marriage. Oduyoye (1995:62) remarks: 'Society demands that she stays married, because a woman has no dignity outside marriage'. Polygyny, monogamy, levirate marriage and marriages in which a woman is married to the family, point in this direction. The latter type of

marriage occurs when a particular family does not have sons. In such cases, a woman (bride) is taken into the family with the purpose of carrying on the line, one of the main purposes of childbearing in the Northern Sotho culture. In such a situation where a woman's status is defined by her marriage, marriage as an institution ultimately becomes idolised. What matters to one as a woman, is marriage. Whether you come from a rich background or whether you are highly educated, a woman's status is still greatly determined by whether she is married (cf also Oduyoye 1995:62). Mbiti (1989:131) rightly observes that both men and women were expected to get married:

To die without getting married and without children, is to be completely cut off from the human society ... to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind. Everybody, therefore, must get married and bear children: that is the greatest hope of the individual for himself and of the community for the individual.

With such a view in mind, argues Mbiti (1989), we will have a better understanding of the many customs and ideas connected with African marriages like *lobola*, polygamy, inheriting wives of the deceased brother and parents arranging marriages for their children to name but a few.

After marriage, as we noted with Mbiti, it was then expected that a wife should bear children. One of the characters in Mathabane's book (1994) *African women: Three generations* comments on true womanhood as she was told by her Venda mother:

A true woman doesn't shout at her husband. A true woman doesn't refuse her husband anything. A true woman doesn't contradict his counsels. A true woman respects her husband as ruler of the house. She obeys and supports him in everything. She helps him accomplish his duties of providing and protecting the home (Mathabane 1994:212).

The same character comments on how at the mountain school,<sup>8</sup> girls are taught that they were created to satisfy, please and serve their men and that all insubordination, sauciness or 'cheek' should be lashed out of them.

What has been noted in the preceding lines about how Venda wives were expected to treat their husbands is also true to the Northern Sotho culture as the following proverbs suggest.

*Mosadi ke tšhwene o lewa mabogo* (A woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten).

Its underlying meaning: The beauty and delight that a woman can cause is shown by her diligence in fulfilling her duties (domestic I would guess) and also taking care of her husband (Rakoma 1970:856).

*Monna ke peu ga a swarwe manenolo* (A man is a seed, punishment must fit the crime).

A woman should honour her husband (Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1975:856).

*Motho ga se more ga o fehlwe* (A human being is not a tree, he/she does not get spoiled).

The tenor of the proverb is that a wife should stop complaining when her husband visits concubines, she must bear in mind that when he comes back to her, he will find her still intact for she cannot be eaten up (by moth) as she is not a tree.

*Tšhwenegatšana o matepe, ge o bitšwa ke boroto o a gana* (Female baboon, you are proud, you do not respond if you are called by the male baboon). If a woman does not obey her husband, she is usually punished (Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1975:1516).

From the above-mentioned proverbs we may conclude that a wife in the Northern Sotho culture has a responsibility to work hard for the family, to take care of her husband and to honour him. She is not expected to complain even if her husband's actions appear to

be out of order (cf getting involved with concubines - the latter is acceptable as long as it is done by a man, a woman cannot do the same for who is she to imitate the head of the family?). It is interesting to note parallels with the Israelite mentality regarding adultery. Extra-marital relations were considered sinful if they were committed by virgins and married women. According to Camp(1996), to her knowledge, Proverbs 5:15-18, which urges a young man to drink water from his own cistern, is the only text in the Hebrew Bible which urges men to monogamous sexuality.

Questioning the husband is deemed insubordination and in a patriarchal Northern Sotho culture (cf also the Venda one), such insubordination could be beaten out of her. Oduyoye (1995:62) seems to endorse the same point in her remark about the position of the Akan husband:

Several proverbs illustrate the dominant status of the husband in the social institution of marriage. There seems to be a basic assumption that in marriage the woman must be moulded to fit the needs of the man, and hence the many references to stubborn women and wife beaters.

A woman in these cultures is like a child who can easily be punished if her actions are found to be wanting in terms of the patriarchal status quo.

c. *The industry of a wife*

A most desired wife in the Northern Sotho/African family is a diligent wife (cf also the Vha-Tsonga family; Manganyi 1994:14-17). The proverb: *Mosadi ke tšhwene, o lewa mabogo* (A woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten) summarises this point. A worthy woman will do all her domestic duties effectively and without complaint. It is interesting to compare this proverb with the following: *Monna ke tšhwene, o ja ka matsogo a mabedi* - The man is a baboon, he eats with two hands. The tenor of this proverb states: Even if

a man is married to a woman, it is acceptable that he can have other women outside the marriage; women who will also satisfy his needs. What arrested my attention as I looked at the two proverbs is their second parts: In the case of a woman, an elaboration of her being compared to a baboon reflects the responsibility she is expected to have towards others including her husband; she has to please and to serve him. On the other hand, as one might expect from a patriarchal culture, the second half of the proverb comparing a man with a baboon, justifies how a man can satisfy his sexual desires anywhere with anybody; that will not be a problem, it depends on who does it. A woman may not even contemplate doing that!

However, noteworthy is the fact that even men were expected to work hard and care for their family, hence the following proverbs:

*Diatla tša monna ga di mele bjang* (Grass does not grow in the hands of a man). This proverb means that a man is not expected to be lazy.

*Lebitla la monna le kgauswi ga tsela* (The grave of a man is found next to the roadside). Many men die far away from their homes due to their efforts of getting food and other necessities to care for their families (Rakoma 1971:146).

The following proverb also shows that females (girls and their mothers) were expected to work hard in the sphere of domesticity.

*Tšhilo le lwala re tšere le tlo šala le eja lewana* - The diligent girl is now married (Ziervogel & Mkgokong 1975:1505). Meaning of proverb: Once a sister (*kgaetšedi*) gets married, her family finds it difficult to cope with the domestic work while her in-laws (*ba bogadi*) become proud and grateful that their domestic duties will be catered for.



Also noteworthy in the above proverb is that a female child appears to be a foreigner in her father's house; she is not counted as a permanent member of the family for she will soon get married. That is why members of this culture did not see it fit to educate their daughters for it was expected that they will soon leave the family to serve in other families. The following proverb also endorses our view: *Mosadi ke theko ya marumo, re foša kgole*. (A woman is a gun sight; we throw her far), which means that we may not know where a virgin (*kgarebe*) may be married, we may think about the neighbourhood only to find that she is married to people who are far away from her home.

What is disturbing is that even at her new place, the woman, who is valued chiefly as the one who is going to carry on the line of the family (male line), is viewed as a foreigner. If there are serious family matters to be discussed, for example the *lobola* to be given in marriage for a daughter, she may not be involved for she is deemed a foreigner. We may elaborate on this point: If she is a *Tau* (totemic name) and gets married to the *Kgaga* people, she is deemed a foreigner to the *Kgaga* clan and cannot therefore get involved with issues pertaining to the *Bakgaga*. The following proverb reveals this: *Tšhipa ge e etile, molato o rerwa ke peba* (When the wild cat is away, the mouse will play; Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1975:1506). If the owner of the family is not around, serious issues pertaining to his family must be attended to by his relatives, particularly his elder or younger brothers (Rakoma 1971:224). However, interestingly, she plays a significant role back home (in the *Tau* family) as a *kgadi* (paternal sister) where such matters may not be discussed in her absence. But even here, it depends on whether she is the right one, *mama mowa wa kgomo tša ka* - the one whose *lobola* (bride price) was used to get a wife for the particular brother (*kgaetšedi*).

In considering this trait of 'foreignness' - the Northern Sotho female experiences foreignness of race, of tribe (the Nguni groups, of particularly the Zulus and the Xhosas tend to look down upon other African tribes in the country), of sex, of being a foreigner

in one's own culture (as daughter and as bride) - I have become interested in biblical texts that speak about foreigners and attempt to read them in such a way that they will mean something to me in my unique context.

I must however, mention that the above-mentioned proverb on the industry expected of a woman in Northern Sotho culture can be empowering to women in the following way: The phrase *Tšhilo le lwala re tšere* (we have taken the pestle and the mortar) formed part of the wedding song when a diligent girl was getting married. The word *lwala* refers to a grinding stone and *tšhilo* (pestle) is a round stone which grinds on a *lwala* (mortar). These two objects were basic for the survival of the people because their staple food, maize meal had to be ground before consumption. The word *lewana* which refers to unground maize (grits) revealed poverty. People who fed on it were mostly poor. The proverb therefore shows that once a diligent woman leaves the family, poverty strikes. At the same time, her arrival in the new family, marks the survival or even wealth of the family.<sup>9</sup>

As one reads these Northern Sotho proverbs, one notes some negative portrayals of women in them. In the following paragraphs I wish to take a look at such proverbs.

d. *Negative images about women in the Northern Sotho proverbs*

i. *Women are quarrelsome*

*Mmetla mpheng wa kgadi a betle wo motelele gobane kgadi le ka moše' a noka e a lema*  
(The one who carves the handle of a hoe of a partenal sister must carve a long one because she hoes even at the other side of the river) Interpretation: If a boy has many sisters, he must learn to be patient because in future, as they get married, they will always

have squabbles/quarrels in their family; he must be ready to come and help settle them (Rakoma 1971:166).

This proverb also shows that girls/daughters were always viewed in terms of their future marriages. We also note that even though they might be the source of quarrels in marriages, nothing is mentioned about the possible causes of the quarrels. It might be polygyny, an institution which is basically determined by her new husband and his family, perhaps it is due to her complaints about her subordinated position. Who knows? One wishes that women could have had opportunities to write down their own feelings about their marriages. Though they have not written about them, old women relate to us their bitter experiences as women of Africa.

ii. *Woman are cowards*

*Mosadi ke pudi, monna ke nku* (A woman is a goat and a man is a sheep; Rakoma 1971:184). According to Ziervogel and Mokgokong (1975:856) this proverb means: One must bear one's difficulties like a man (male); it also means that men keep their problems to themselves, but women let them out vociferously. It is worthy of note that in patriarchal Africa, women are always on the receiving end as we might have gleaned from our look at the above proverbs; they have always encountered difficulties and historically they have shown that they are more tolerant than males. Throughout their youth they have been counselled (*go laiwa*) in their fathers' homes and at the initiation schools to be tolerant and subordinate to their husbands.

Yet the above commentators, do not seem to give them the credit they deserve. Another commentator explains this proverb to mean that a woman is a coward in difficulties while a man is strong and cruel in difficulties (cf Rakoma 1971:184).

This is an unfortunate analysis of the emotions of the two sexes. Though we advocate a non-sexist society, this should not be understood to mean a sexless society. Though males and females are of equal worth before their creator, they are not the same and their creator purposefully made them different. The traits of each should be accommodated and used creatively as far as it is possible. For example, the emotions of women can be used effectively in comforting those who need comfort and not for insulting men, while physical strength can also be used effectively for building up families and not for battering women.

The above proverb on the cowardice of a woman can be counteracted by another one which actually reveals the boldness of a woman: *Mmago ngwana o swara thipa ka bogaleng* (The mother of a child holds the sharp part of the knife). It means that a mother is the one who is always vigilant in taking care of the needs of the family (particularly the children's) even if it involves risks - holding the sharp part of the knife. A woman is therefore praised for her unfailing boldness as a mother.

### iii. *Women cannot lead*

Another negative stereotype about women comes to light in the following proverb: *Tša etwa ke ye tshadi pele, di wela ka lewa* (If the herd - of cattle - is led by a cow, it will fall into a cave). It is interpreted as follows: If men can be controlled by women they will land in trouble and experience many unnecessary faults for the one who is ignorant and powerless is the one who is controlling them (Rakoma 1971:222).

The Northern Sotho mentality about women from this proverb is clear: Women cannot lead men for women are ignorant and weak. One wonders how women could be informed while their sphere of influence and the scope of their actions was restricted. How could they be informed while their femaleness also in most cases meant lesser education (at

least in its Western mould)? How could they be powerful in a society in which normative humanity was male? Why should they be regarded as powerless when they give birth to human beings (including males)? They are the ones who enable the male lineages to continue. Can such be regarded as powerless?

Despite this image of a powerless woman, Northern Sotho people appear to have been aware of the indirect power of women:

*Naswa ya mošate e fenyā e sa rage* (A black royal cow prevails even if it does not kick). A woman is able to control her husband although she does not possess strength to fight (Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1975:846-847).

*Tšhupša, golola dinaka di hlabane* (Animal without horns, howl, so that horns can fight each other) - A woman's crying can arouse sympathy and pity.

In a context where one's potential to exercise power is not legitimated, where one's voice is suppressed most of the time, one may try to find subtle or indirect ways to make one's influence felt. The first proverb brings this to light. The second one shows that society tends to be more sympathetic towards a woman's tears. This is probably due to the perception that women are viewed as powerless and harmless. In the midst of trouble, it is claimed that they tend to be cowards, as noted in one of the proverbs above; their crying then could immediately appeal to the emotions of the powerful and the cruel of society - men. Such a reaction was also due to the expectation of society that men should take care of their families (including their wives) as some proverbs reveal.

By way of rounding off the section on the portraits of women in the Northern Sotho proverbs, it is worthy to mention that, amongst other things, a daughter was advised (*laiwa*) before she went to her new home (husband's place), and that her husband's home

(*bogadi*) is her grave - *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*. (The grave of a woman is at her husband's home). The meaning of the proverb is: Even in the case of the death of a husband, a wife should know that she does not have the right to return to her family. She must cling to her in-laws for they are the ones who should console her in her mourning (Rakoma 1971:146).

It is understandable that in a culture which sets great store by marriage and children, any situation which could lead to the disruption of marriage would be rectified immediately. A young widow would be provided with someone from the lineage of her husband for marriage to continue; if she dies, someone (a sister) from her lineage would be given as a substitute (*seantlo*) for her.

A survey of the above Northern Sotho proverbs and customs reveal that women are not regarded as people in their own right. They are defined basically in terms of their roles as related to men and to how they should honour and serve their husbands. They are valued as bearers of children, particularly sons, who could carry on the line of their fathers. We also observed some negative portrayals of women: they are cowards, powerless and ignorant, hence they cannot lead men. They could be punished if male society deemed it necessary. Deaths of oppressive husbands could not relieve them from the shackles of their home (*bogadi*) for *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* - the grave of a woman is at her husband's place!

As one might expect, these proverbs serve men's interests or even put them in a positive light as the following proverbs reveal:

*Monna ga a hlabje ka 'rumo le tee* (A man is not stabbed by one sword/Give a man a second mug of beer; Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1975:856). The proverb implies that a man

as the head of the family, must always get more things, for example more drinks, more food, et cetera.

*Mosadi ke pudi, monna ke nku* (A woman is a goat, a man is a sheep). As we have noted, this proverb reflects on the cruelty and boldness of males.

A number of Northern Sotho proverbs are used by men to defend their promiscuity:

*Monna ke phoka, o wa bošego* (A man is fog, he falls in the middle of the night). A man might come home right during the middle of the night and he may not be questioned.

*Monna ke thaka, o a naba* (A man is a pumpkin plant; he spreads). A man can have sexual relations with a number of women for he spreads like a pumpkin plant. (Interestingly, he will never allow other men - who also claim to be pumpkin plants - to spread into his family!)

*Monna ke tšhwene, o ja ka matsogo a mabedi*: (A man is a baboon, he eats with two hands). We noted previously that it shows that a married man can have concubines.

As observed previously, a woman could not try to imitate men in this regard for she is a woman. If it was discovered that a woman had had extra-marital relations, she could even be sent home 'to be taught how to behave herself properly' *go rutwa molao*; (cf also Rikhotso (1979:34-39), with regard to the same situation in the traditional Va-Tsonga society).

The above examples reveal that the Northern Sotho culture seems to be all out to serve the patriarchal status quo in which men's interests are always catered for.

We have previously noted that some proverbs use the word *monna* (man) as a generic term to include all people. One is tempted to question the meaning of the word *monna*. It is interesting to note that the word *monna* from the root - *nna* (man, manhood) shares a similar root with the absolute pronoun *nna* which means 'I' and or 'me'. *Bonnà* is translated 'I myself'. *Bonná* from *monná* (man) is translated 'manhood', 'manliness' or 'male sexual organs'. The two words *bonnà* (I myself) and *bonná* (manhood, manliness) are basically the same except for their intonation (since Northern Sotho is a tone language, homonyms are given separate semantic values by having a different intonation). One may ask whether this is a coincidence in a patriarchal culture that the root for the word for self (-*nna*) is similar to the root for man (-*nna*) as if all the 'selves' (male or female) are to see themselves included in the male (*monná*) self.

Having got a glimpse of images of women through the insights given by Northern Sotho/African proverbs, we will now evaluate these images from a *Bosadi* perspective. Such an evaluation is necessitated by our previous observation that a *Bosadi* approach aims at, amongst others, reviving the liberative aspects of the Northern Sotho (African) culture, while at the same time criticising those elements which subordinate women. However, before we embark on this evaluation, it is worthy to note that the conditions of African women, particularly as they appear in the above proverbs, are changing gradually today. There are a few African men for example, who understand that a woman and a man are both of equal worth. However many, are still grappling, and will still grapple, with the equality clause - equality of men and women - which has been included in the new democratic constitution of the country.



## D. EVALUATING NORTHERN SOTHO PROVERBS FROM A BOSADI PERSPECTIVE

Preoccupation with the Africanity or African-ness of an African woman in South Africa is one of the key elements of the *Bosadi* approach. I therefore wish to respond to the images of 'ideal womanhood' as portrayed in the above Northern Sotho proverbs from a *Bosadi* perspective.

The *Bosadi* approach does not embrace the African culture indiscriminately, it is selective. It applies a hermeneutics of suspicion to African culture to unmask the oppressive elements of this culture and a hermeneutics of remembrance or imagination to revive its liberative elements.

### 1. THE DEFINITION OF A WOMAN

As a point of departure, a definition of woman from a *Bosadi* perspective will be in order: A *mosadi* (woman) is a female African person who, though conscious of the corporeal mentality of Africans and also respecting it, can stand on her own affirming her full humanity as a creature in God's image. As an independent person, she may choose to get involved with a male partner in a marriage relationship but that does not mean that she loses her full humanness and independence to her male partner. She must therefore not be defined in terms of her male partner. At the same time, if she does not choose to be in a marriage relationship, she must be at liberty to remain single, which should not imply that she is at liberty to tamper with the marriages of those who have opted for marriage or that (African) men should see her as an easy prey for their penchant for extra-marital relationships.

## 2. RELATIONS BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

A *Bosadi* approach acknowledges the African-ness of African people, both males and females. African females and males in South Africa have a responsibility to affirm their Africinity and to revive the good elements of their culture while condemning as well as resisting those elements that denigrate others. Both sexes are important and they need each other in building up a new liberated African community in post-apartheid South Africa. A *Bosadi* critical approach recognises the worth and equality of both males and females. It also acknowledges the differences between the two sexes. Each of these sexes has its own limitations and strengths. Strengths should be jointly harnessed while limitations should be jointly attended to. Woman and man, therefore, should complement each other. This exercise should not be difficult for us as Africans because, as we argued previously, *Motho ke motho ka batho* (A human being is a human being because of other human beings). Therefore both male and female should strive to exercise *ubuntu/botho*, which literally means 'being human'. Being human to others means that you want them to experience their full worth as fellow human beings as you deal with them. Hence African men will have to grapple with, for example, the folk-talk (proverbs, folk tales, idioms, etc) which denies women their full humanness.

## 3. A WOMAN IN MARRIAGE

As I have noted in the previous paragraph, a woman may decide (not necessarily parents as it traditionally used to be the case, and which still occurs in some rural African communities in the country) to be joined to a man in marriage. Being married should not mean that she loses her humanness to the man. She must be regarded as a full, responsible adult who is independent. Independence does not mean that the two should not communicate or even work together for the good of their marriage.

Traditionally, *lobola* is given to the daughter's family as a way of gratitude for the gift of a wife. Ntiri (1982:13) notes that the bride price, the passage of money, goods and services from the kin of the groom to the kin of the bride reveals that its function is also related to affiliation and kinship. She holds that the ramifications of these services are numerous, varied and complex but the major functions are made to assure that children are affiliated with the father's kin so that they may be eligible to inherit from him, or in the case of matrilineal societies, to share in their mother's brother's property if he has no daughters of his own who will bring in a bride price.

What Ntiri says also holds for the Northern Sotho culture which is patrilineal. In this culture, marriage takes place between kins and is a way of strengthening relations between the two clans. That is why, in most cases, marriage is arranged by parents without involving the two who are supposed to marry. *Lobola* is not so much a means of buying a wife, than a way of expressing gratitude for *sego sa meetse* (someone who would draw water for the family). Experience has, however, shown that *lobola* is one of the factors used by a woman's in-laws (particularly fellow women! mother-in-law and sisters-in-law to subordinate her) to show that the *lobola* paid was not in vain: she has to bear children; she has to be careful and patient; in a nutshell, she has to have her movements restricted, not forgetting that *o tlile ka kgomo* (it is because cattle was given for her that she came). At the same time, a woman who is valued and respected is the one for whom *lobola* has been given. Increasingly today, one finds many brides who live with their in-laws while *lobola* has yet to be paid or has been paid only partially - another factor showing how highly esteemed marriage is in the Northern Sotho culture. The system of *lobola* therefore tends to be both oppressive and empowering to Northern Sotho women. Elsewhere (1995d)<sup>10</sup> I have suggested that if the system of *lobola* serves (as we have noted with Mark Mathabane (1994) in chapter two) to subordinate women, it must be done away with. I suggest that in such cases women may use their family names even

in the new families. This will also solve a problem facing young widows whom society does not seem to allow to re-marry.

A *Bosadi* approach recommends *lobola* as long as it serves the good of all. If the full humanity of a woman is acknowledged, African husbands will not make use of proverbs that denigrate women: proverbs advocating that a woman can be punished, that she is powerless and ignorant, proverbs encouraging her to be silent at all costs, silent even as she sees him moving from one concubine to another. Regarding polygyny, one would suggest that this be done with the permission of the wife and that it be considered only if it serves the interests of all concerned.

In a nutshell, a *Bosadi* approach advocates healthy family relationships: a family characterised by the recognition of the full humanity of both husband and wife; a family governed by love and justice. Traditional African customs and practices can be followed as long as they do not infringe on the individual rights of both parties.

#### 4. WOMEN AS MOTHERS

Our previous survey of ideal womanhood in Northern Sotho society concludes that women are valued, amongst others, as mothers. Society expects a married couple to have children. If that is not the case, measures are taken to correct the situation. We have noted that these measures affect both men and women but in patrilineal cultures, like the Northern Sotho one, the blame falls mostly on women.

While one values child bearing - indeed this a very honourable calling - it must not be idolised, as I have already argued. Society must learn to accommodate exceptions to what the status quo upholds. For example, there are many people who are naturally infertile. Does that imply that they can never enter into a monogamous relationship?

Does that imply that a childless marriage could never be happy? What about those who deliberately choose not to have children or even those who choose to have fewer children? A *Bosadi* approach would suggest that married men and women should be valued for who they are - full human beings - irrespective of whether they have children or not.

In cases where there are children in a marriage, it must be the responsibility of both the father and the mother to raise the children (cf Oduyoye 1994; Ruether 1993). This joint 'mothering' will make life easier, particularly for the working mother and also erase the stereotype that the domestic sphere belongs solely to women. According to the *Bosadi* perspective, anyone (female or male) can belong to any sphere depending on her/his efficiency and or interest. A man, for example, may choose to operate from the private sphere of the home if he so wishes and a woman likewise may choose to operate from the public sphere. My argument is that both spheres are valuable and therefore the current tendency to look down upon the home, should be challenged and resisted.

In the above paragraphs, I have attempted to evaluate ideal womanhood, particularly as it is portrayed in the Northern Sotho proverbs from a *Bosadi* perspective. With this information in mind plus other aspects of the *Bosadi* approach, outlined at the beginning of the present chapter, I now turn to Proverbs 31:10-31.

## **E. PROVERBS 31:10-31 FROM A BOSADI VIEWPOINT**

### **1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

In the previous chapter, I preferred to reflect on a feminist reading of Proverbs 31:10-31 as a means of breaking away from the traditional way of reading this text.

In the present section, I will re-read Proverbs 31:10-31 from a *Bosadi* perspective. It is, however, unfortunate that I was not able to find sources reflecting on how African women have read this text in the past. In the previous chapter, however, I have given Renita Weems' (an African-American Old Testament womanist scholar) view about the picture of the Woman of Worth in our poem.

How do I respond to the image of the woman portrayed in Proverbs 31:10-31 as a Northern Sotho woman in South Africa? Does the portrait of a woman in this text empower me to emulate her or does it subordinate me?

My point of departure in this section is to refer back to the words of Camp (1985:12) that literary and religious forms do not arise from and live in a vacuum. People's experiences shape images that appear in their literature. As I have noted in chapter three, the information published in Camp's (1985) book, on the image of the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 was reiterated by her in our telephone conversation. She argued that the text, even though it is an acrostic highly stylised literary conceit, cannot be removed from the historical context of its making. This suggests that though the poet might not have been dealing with a particular human woman in this text, his portrayal of woman could have been based on certain particular expectations that Israelite society had about women. This will be also my view as I read this poem.

As we read the poem, we do not doubt that the poet relates the practical qualities of a human woman. This is unlike the passages dealing with Woman Wisdom, a metaphorical picture of woman, in Proverbs 1-9, in which the reader can clearly observe the metaphorical use of language. For these reasons I would like to differ with scholars like McCreesh (1985) and Gous (1995) who see the Woman of Worth of Proverbs 31:10-31 as Wisdom personified. That should not imply that I do not see close similarities between this poem and those dealing with Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 (cf section E (1) in the

previous chapter), but their apparent similarities do not convince me that the אִשָּׁה חַיִּל is Woman Wisdom.

In Proverbs 31:10-31 the poet, however, has given us an idealised picture of a woman. This is surely not a real woman; it is an ideal. Aitken (1986:158) notes: 'So, while there are "ordinary points" in the portrait which should commend themselves to any housewife above all that she "fears the Lord" - as a whole it cannot be read as a kind of blueprint of the ideal Israelite housewife - either for men to measure their wives against or for their wives to'. I would however differ with Aitken who holds that the ideal woman portrayed here was not meant to be emulated. I think that the reason for this portrayal and also for the inclusion of this piece in the canon was necessitated by the observation that this ideal could be striven for. This strife for an ideal woman makes sense particularly in a context where there was an identity crisis (cf section G, in the previous chapter). In such a context, men would strive for an ideal or true Jewish woman who unlike Woman Stranger would not cause disruption to society.

As Brenner (1993) notes, in Jewish lore the poem is recited on various prescribed occasions - before a wedding, or on the Sabbath eve by a husband to his bride or wife. Interestingly, of the Jewish people I talked to about the poem (cf Schaalman 1995; Braude 1995; Gittay 1995), not one appeared to be hesitant in seeing the picture portrayed in 31:10-31 as that of a real woman. My argument is that the portrait is not that of a real woman but an ideal that people were to strive for, an ideal based on certain expectations which society had about women. A few examples shedding light on this ideal picture will suffice:

The industry of the Woman of Worth appears to be exaggerated - early riser, late sleeper, running around though she has high quality servants (נְעֻרֹת), making clothes of a high quality. No flesh and blood person can be so efficient in all these many activities.

According to some scholars some aspects of the picture of the woman portrayed here are unusual: She is defined in wholly non-sexual terms (cf Bird 1974). Aitken (1986) also remarks that from our (Western) modern viewpoint, we are liable to be struck by a complete lack of relationships between the good wife and her husband.

I am not sure if an African scholar might hold the same views about the unusual elements of the portrait as those of the two scholars above. For example, in a typical Northern Sotho society, there was a clear cut distinction between girls and boys and between men and women. They were kept apart by separate initiation schools and separate spheres of operation. This is unlike Western society, where the tendency is that husband and wife in most cases, prefer to be together or walk together. Typical African men or boys could be ridiculed for being seen together with women or girls, even if they were married. In such a setting therefore, it is normal that one could comment about the wife without necessarily commenting on the husband or vice-versa.

With regard to the wife being defined in wholly non-sexual terms as Bird (1974) and Brenner (1993) comment, this would also not be much of a problem for traditional Northern Sotho people for even in daily speech, one may never comment on such matters because they are regarded as secrets.

An unusual aspect of the portrait of the *אִשָּׁה חַיִּל*, which in my view would cause concern for African readers, is that the Woman of Worth is not defined as a mother in the sense of a child-bearer. In the previous sections, we observed that both the Israelite culture and the African (Northern Sotho) culture set great store by children. Therefore one may conclude that for the members of these cultures an image of an ideal woman without children is unthinkable. However, a *Bosadi* concept would not have problems with such an image, for according to this approach, a woman has full dignity as a human being even without children. Her status should not be defined in terms of any member of her



immediate family (husband or children); therefore, even in marriage, she must be allowed to control her own sexuality.

Notwithstanding these unusual images, we may still ask about the human images that shaped the portrait of the Woman of Worth of our poem. As one reads this poem, one can speculate about certain expectations held of women in the Israelite society. I wish to focus on these expectations and investigate whether they make sense in a Northern Sotho context. What impact do these expectations have on women?

The first and most important of these is that a woman is viewed as a manager of the household:

## 2. WOMEN: HOUSEHOLD MANAGERS

As we have noted in the previous chapter, one of the main images of a wife which recur frequently throughout biblical literature is that of a wife as manager of the household (cf Camp 1985:84). The Woman of Worth is the controller of all household activities. So preoccupied is she with the household activities that the poet calls the house hers (cf the word **בית** in verses 15, 21 and 27).

As part of her management of the family, the Woman of Worth sees to it that the household (husband, children and servants) is well-fed and well-clothed and that duties are allocated to the servants. The Woman of Worth also controls the economy of the household. She considers a field and buys it, plants a vineyard, makes linen garments and sells them. She is not only restricted to the private sphere of the home; she also goes out into the public sphere for her business transactions amongst others. However, if we observe, with Ruether (1995b) that the situation pictured here is that of a pre-industrial

society, it might not be proper to see a division between the public and private activities of the Woman of Worth. In the pre-industrial society, as we noted previously, the economy of the house formed part of the household. It is therefore understandable that a woman being viewed as the controller of the house, would also control the household economy.

Worthy to note is that the **אִשָּׁת חַיִּל** is a rich woman, as we observed previously. Her many activities, buying a field and being able to work on it, making high quality clothes, managing high quality servants bear witness to her wealth. As we observed, not all Israelite women were like her.

The quality of the **אִשָּׁת חַיִּל** as manager of the household reveals how the Israelites valued the family and women as homemakers. The pertinent question in feminist circles would be whether such a definition of a woman and her prescribed role liberates women or subordinates them.

If we analyse the image of the Woman of Worth from a *Bosadi* perspective we may get the following picture: In typical African (Northern Sotho) culture, women are also viewed as managers of household activities. The Northern Sotho saying: *Lapa ke la mosadi* (family belongs to the woman) means that whatever information one may wish to know about the home (on children, food, utensils) a woman would be the relevant person to consult. That, however, does not mean that she controls the house (which is not hers); it belongs to the head of the house, the man. The Northern Sotho woman is therefore traditionally not manager of the household activities in the sense of the Woman of Worth. As we have noted, the picture of the Woman of Worth is that of a rich woman. In our description of the context of a Northern Sotho woman, we noted that many of them belong to the marginalised poor of society. Hence the picture of a rich woman who

manages so many activities, will not appeal to them as the majority of them may never hope to be like the Woman of Worth one day. To some readers, this text may be viewed as an elitist text for the haves of the society of its time and for the haves of our society and therefore as a 'text of terror' (in the words of Tribe 1984) for the poor women of South Africa.

I would agree with those who view the situation portrayed in the text as that of the pre-industrial era (cf Ruether 1995b; Bird 1995). In pre-colonial Africa, the economy of the household formed part of the household, therefore there was a slim division between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere (cf Sudarkasa 1994; Rodney 1982). According to Ntiri (1982:14), African women have historically been heavily engaged in different economic activities perhaps to a greater extent than women in other parts of the world. She further notes that the introduction of money as a medium of exchange as well as the results of colonisation and subsequent industrialisation have meant that relatively greater economic benefits are available to men.

The above information on the African pre-colonial setting holds water for the Northern Sotho context. In pre-colonial South Africa, the economy of the household has always formed part of the home. The division of the public versus the private sphere was thus slim. Both men and women worked together in the economy of the family. Women however, made a greater contribution in the fields than men. In some societies, women could have a say in what they produced in the fields. In South Africa, the division between the two spheres only became significant with the introduction of capitalist economy by the colonialists. A new definition of labour as a way of earning money was introduced. As a result, Western wages (money) were more esteemed than African wages (crops, cattle etc). Hence work that was performed in the public sphere (mostly by men) came to be more valued than that done in the private sphere by women. Even the contribution that African (Northern Sotho) women used to make in the agricultural

economy of the family was undermined by the capitalistic government as large scale agricultural economy fell into the hands of the powerful few. African women are thus left with infertile fields which only yield poor crops in their small scale subsistence farming.

We therefore observe that capitalistic colonialist economy served to push African women more to the background (from the Northern Sotho proverbs, we observed that they were already in the background before this). Their work (solely performed in the home) came to be despised. Capitalism disturbed a very significant institution for Africa, the family (cf Mbiti 1989:104-106), with its migratory labour policies. The latter removed the African man from his family almost on a permanent basis. In such a situation the Northern Sotho woman became the real manager of the family as all matters pertaining to family came to be in her care. The unity of the family was disrupted. The family lost the dignity and significance it used to have in traditional Africa.

I, however, like to argue that controlling the family and managing it like the Woman of Worth of our text should not be viewed as a weakness. To be a family woman in the Northern Sotho context (like the **אשה חיל** of the Israelite context) is to be in a position of power on the basis of the following considerations:

- a. Due to the migratory policies of the apartheid regime, many African women had to serve and are still serving as both fathers and mothers of families because their husbands had to move to cities to work for Whites. The women thus had to display good administrative skills for the smooth running of the family.
- b. Remaining at home does not imply that a woman is not making a contribution to the family. Bearing children and nurturing them in cultures that set great store by children, like the Hebrew and the African cultures, is not necessarily a position of

weakness. It is actually a position of power because this woman is valued more and enjoys a higher status than the one who has no children. While there is nothing wrong with such an approach in my opinion, it becomes problematic if it is promoted at all costs; for example, if barrenness or having few children is viewed as a genuine ground for divorce. It also becomes problematic, particularly with regard to present day conditions in which more and more women join the public sphere, if nurturing is viewed as a woman's role only. Both working men and women could help each other in the nurturing of their children.

- c. Remaining at home does not necessarily imply that one is not making a living for the family. Many African women operate small business transactions from their homes. They do not necessarily need to go outside the home to work. Thus African women in South Africa as we have noted (cf also their African-American sisters) have always worked both inside and outside their homes.
- d. Let me indicate that, just like the *אִשָּׁה חַיִּל* who operates behind closed doors and makes her husband successful at the gates, thus actually wielding power invisibly, the success of the public occupation of the African man, be he migrant labourer or one who works locally, depends on the efficiency of the woman who controls the household in his absence.

By way of concluding the quality of the Woman of Worth as a household manager, I wish to argue that viewed from a *Bosadi* perspective, it may offer liberating possibilities for Northern Sotho women in South Africa in the following way:

- a. The quality reminds all Africans in South Africa to revive the lost mentality of family that traditional Africans used to enjoy. The family is important, not only

for Africans in South Africa, but also for all people all over the globe because it is the basic unit of every society. Therefore anyone (male or female) who chooses the private sphere as a place of work should not be looked down upon. They are also making a valuable contribution.

- b. The quality of woman as household manager serves to correct an exaggerated perception that African women in South Africa are oppressed. The verb 'oppress', as we have observed, implies powerlessness. The African woman in the country is not wholly devoid of power. The problem is that her power is not legitimated in a patriarchal culture. However, there is a sphere in which her exercise of power is recognised - the home. I should, however, mention that a *Bosadi* approach would see a home as a sphere of operation for anyone who chooses to operate from there. It must not be viewed as solely a womanly sphere as it used to be the case in traditional Northern Sotho society and even today. Coupled with this fact is the suggestion that there should be equal division of labour between members of the different sexes in the family. This is highly recommended in a situation where both husband and wife work in the public sphere. This will alleviate the burden of work that working African women experience today.

The portrait of the rich woman who manages the activities of a very complex household can at the same time be problematic to the poor Northern Sotho woman who may never hope to be like the Woman of Worth in her own lifetime. As I argued, it may be viewed as a text relevant for the haves of our day even as it was probably used by the haves of its time. What does a poor woman have in such a text? This may be a question from a despondent reader.

The quality of the Woman of Worth as manager of the household in which she lives therefore has both liberative and subordinating possibilities if viewed from a *Bosadi* perspective.

### 3. AN INDUSTRIOUS WOMAN

Another quality that is foregrounded by the poet about what society might have expected from women is that of industry. The industriousness of the Woman of Worth is manifested in the manifold tasks she does. However, I must hasten to argue that even those who would opt for a literal interpretation of the poem would agree that it is humanly impossible to engage in all these tasks, let alone effectively and efficiently. As in other idealised types, there is a tendency to exaggerate. However, we may assume that the poet wished to present a picture of a woman who is not lazy, a woman who according to verse 27: 'does not eat the bread of idleness' וְלֶחֶם עֲצִלוּת לֹא תֹאכַל. This notion of hard work may be understandable against the background of the post-exilic social context. The post-exilic context, like the pre-monarchic context, was characterised by adjustments to new, unfavourable conditions - the capital city in ruins, restricted territory from which to subsist, et cetera. There was thus a need for the joint effort of hard work on the part of both men and women to meet the subsistence needs of the family (cf Lyons 1987; Camp 1985; Meyers 1983). From the paean, we may assume that an Israelite woman was not expected to be lazy. This makes even more sense in a context where, as we have noted with Shaalman (1995) and Fontaine (1988), women's domestic duties formed part of sacred activities. It is also interesting to note that laziness is one of the habits that the Book of Proverbs condemns (cf Pr 12:27; 13:4; 19:15, 24).

How would we view industriousness from a *Bosadi* perspective? An analysis of the Northern Sotho proverbs show that one of the qualities of ideal womanhood in this culture is hard work. This is not only applicable to the Northern Sotho women. Manganyi (1994) also notes that industry is one of the qualities of ideal womanhood in the Vha-Tsonga culture. From my conversation with Venda women, I was also informed that in the Venda

culture, hard work characterises an ideal woman. It is no exaggeration that Africans on the whole, expect women to work hard. Oduyoye (1995:66-67) refers to an interesting yet disturbing fable recounted by Christine Obbo on how role assignments came into being: God was calling women from their household chores to other duties. The women, it is recounted, were so engrossed in their work that they kept on telling God to wait for them to complete the tasks they had in hand. Men, having nothing much to do, were sitting around (being idle) and so offered to attend to God. From that day onwards, God decreed that women's work would never end. Oduyoye observes that Jamaicans have captured this in a proverb: Man's work lasts till set of sun; women's work is never done. The last part of this proverb reminds us of what the Woman of Worth does - the one who rises early in the morning and whose lamp does not go out.

A commonly used proverb in the Northern Sotho context, to show society's expectation of hard work on the part of a woman, is: *Mosadi ke tšhwene o lewa mabogo*, literally, a woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten. The meaning of this proverb is as follows: A commendable woman is the one who does her household duties effectively and also takes care of her husband (Rakoma 1971:184). Another translator interprets it as follows: A good wife is a diligent one (Ziervogel and Mokgokong 1975:1154). The first part of this proverb (*Mosadi ke tšhwene*) may be interpreted negatively to mean that what counts in a woman is her hands (*matsogo*), not her beauty. It therefore does not matter whether she is as ugly as a baboon, as long as she is diligent. One may argue that there is also an element of self-sacrifice suggested in the proverb, she gives her hands to be eaten. The other positive meaning is to see the word *tšhwene* (baboon) as a metaphor for an animal that works hard. Whatever the shade of meaning we adopt for the first part of this proverb, what is of interest for our purposes, is the second half: her hands are eaten, meaning, she must be diligent.



Industry as a virtue is required of every society, including the South African society. With the advance of political liberation in our country, the culture of hard work has been lost, particularly amongst Blacks. More and more, people seem to be comfortable to earn money for which they did not work. The many toyi-toyis and boycotts going on in the country at present prove this fact. As I have argued previously, African women have always worked, and for us it may not be much of a problem to revive the culture of hard work. I would further contend that hard work is not supposed to be confined to women only as is implied in the proverb above. In the family, both man and woman (including their children) should work for the welfare of their family. Even those whose class allows them to have domestic servants should not leave everything in the hands of the servants as the servants also get tired as human beings. If the work ethic can be restored to extended families, African women who are new brides will find their new homes better places to live in, for there not only they (for whom *lobola* has been paid), but every able-bodied person, will contribute towards the smooth running of that family. Nationally, the restoration of the culture of hard work by all South Africans (Black and White, women and men) is very urgent for the boosting of the already weak South African economy. Gone should be days when hard work was expected only from those at the bottom of the kyriarchal ladder (mostly African women) while the powerful (African men, middle class African women, Whites) are 'sitting at the gates'.

The quality of the אִשָּׁה חַיִּל as an industrious woman may be enriching for Northern Sotho women in a context where everybody (and not only women as the proverb seems to indicate) is expected to work hard. It also becomes enriching in a context where hard work is rewarded. We have already observed that domestic work and farm work are types of low-paid jobs in the country, jobs mostly done by African women in South Africa. On the other hand, this may be an oppressive quality if only a section of society is expected to work hard and without fair remuneration.

#### 4. A WOMAN WHO FEARS THE LORD

The other quality a good woman was expected to have according to the Israelite view seems to me to be that women were expected to fear the Lord: The woman who fears the Lord is to be praised (v 30).

In my view, this is the pivotal verse in this poem. As we observed in the previous chapter, some have proposed that this verse might be a late emendation seeing that it introduces a new theme which is religious. Their argument is that the poem is engaged with the secular activities of a woman and that therefore the inclusion of the fear of the Lord, something religious, is not harmonious with the secular mood of the whole poem. I, however, endorse the view by Whybray (1994) that the above is a mistaken view that the sacred and the secular were two separate spheres in the thought of the ancient world. Like the African world view, the Israelite view of the world is holistic, no separation was made between the various spheres. As we noted with Whybray (1994; cf also Wolters 1984:161-166) the two aspects (fear of the Lord and the practical activities of the Woman of Worth) can be married. Because of the fear of the Lord, the Woman of Worth is able to fulfil all those secular-sacred activities.

In an African setting, there is no dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, the secular and the sacred, the political and the economic aspects of life. All these aspects form a whole. Therefore, if one aspect of the whole is disturbed, the others will be affected as well. An example will be in order at this stage: If there is a drought, this will have implications in the economic sphere, it may be assumed that in the religious sphere the ancestors are angry at people for not behaving properly in the social sphere. We may thus conclude that this division between different spheres is foreign to African people in South Africa. It is a Western idea. Martin (1987:375) speaks about '... the split consciousness inherited with the Cartesian, Newtonian system'.

Some liberation theologians (West 1991; Mosala 1989) would view this Western idea, in particular the division between the sacred (spiritual) and the secular (political, economic, social) as a deliberate effort by the state theology of the apartheid era to keep the Blacks preoccupied with the spiritual (heaven, the bliss of the future kingdom of God, eschatology, etc) and ignore the other aspects of their lives, like the political and the economic aspects, as a way of making them feel comfortable with the status quo. Chikane (1988) for example, advocates for the balancing of the pendulum, that both aspects (political, social, economic and the spiritual) should be taken care of. That is why we have observed in the first chapter of this work that the past approaches of White biblical scholarship were text rather than context-oriented. For us as Africans, with a holistic outlook, both text- and context oriented approaches make sense. For us, the holistic outlook of the Israelite mentality, as is manifested in Proverbs 31:10-31, makes sense.

Coupled with this holistic view shared by both Africans and the Israelites, is the conviction that good works are to be rewarded positively while bad ones are to be punished. This element is also notable in 31:10-31. According to verse 31, the Woman of Worth has to be given the fruit of her hands. Her works are to praise her even at the public places. Even in the Northern Sotho setting, good works are praised irrespective of who did them. Women who produced some good harvest for example, would be called by their praise names. In Northern Sotho culture, both men and women have praise names.

Rewarding people according to what they have done is empowering for it shows that we acknowledge their full dignity as humans (*re ba dira ka botho* - we are treating them in a human way) and that we are appreciating their work. As we do this, we are also showing our commitment to justice - one of the key words in post-apartheid South Africa.

Another aspect of the Woman of Worth that is notable as one reads this poem is her relationship with her husband.

## 5. THE WOMAN OF WORTH AND HER HUSBAND

As we observed in the previous chapter, one of the main criticisms of White feminists about the image of the אִשָּׁה קַיִל as we see in our paean is that she is not independent: she is defined in terms of her husband and what she does is done to enhance the status of her husband. In verses 11 and 12 for example, we note that her husband has confidence in her as she does him good all the days of her life. In verse 23, because of her, her husband is respected at the city gates. Worthy of note is that the above verses, which seem to depict the dependent status of the Woman of Worth according to these scholars, may be interpreted by some scholars (cf Gittay and Gittay 1995) to reveal the power and the independence of the Woman of Worth. The fact that her husband trusts in her as she does him good all the days of her life, according to these scholars, show that we are actually dealing with a powerful woman here, one who can be trusted by a respectable man in Israel's social order, one who 'sits at the gates'. This same woman is such an influential figure in the family, that her influence is felt at the very gates! Her husband is respected at the gates because of her. This is definitely no mean figure!

I would agree with this view and also add that in a family-oriented patriarchal society, like Israel, it would not make sense to praise a wife in isolation from her husband and her children. I do not have problems with a situation where a wife does good to her husband in their marital context, I would have a problem if the goodness (*botho* to echo the Northern Sotho context) is always expected from one party - either the woman or the man.

We must admit that the present poem does not give us a complete picture of the actual context of an Israelite marriage for it is written from a male perspective as we have observed earlier on. If we could have had a poem in praise of a good husband, it would probably also foreground the good qualities of the husband and the good he does for his wife without necessarily implying that he is defined in terms of his wife.

The evidence in the text that seems to me to highlight the androcentric nature of the text is the naming of the husband of this powerful, independent woman as her **בעל**, master, owner. The word **איש** (her man) might have suited the context better. This does not, however, mean that I endorse the problematic term if used in other contexts. This word in my view denies a woman her full personhood as she is viewed as the one who can be owned by her master, the male. Though such a naming makes sense in a culture that is patriarchal, it must be rejected.

The other problematic aspect of the relations between males and females notable in the poem is that of a separation between a public male (significant) sphere - the city gates - and the female domestic sphere. I deem the first as more significant for that is the sphere where national issues relating to politics and justice, as we noted previously, were discussed and settled. Unfortunately, women scarcely participated in that sphere. Though we acknowledge that the Woman of Worth, through the exercise of her indirect power, did make a contribution in that sphere, it would have done Israelite society good to allow any efficient person to participate at the gates of the city - irrespective of whether the person was rural or urban, poor or rich, foreigner who had joined the Israelite society or 'true' Jew, women or men. At the same time, it would have done Israelite society justice if both men and women could have participated together in household activities.

The issue of the city gates reminds one of the traditional Northern Sotho *kgoro* - a meeting place of men, lineal group and clan (cf Ziervogel and Mokgokong 1975). As one might expect in a Northern Sotho patriarchal culture, except in the Lobedu context, a *kgoro* is constituted by men. A woman could only appear there if there was a need, for example, if she had a case against someone. Despite the fact that she did not participate actively in matters pertaining to the *kgoro*, we will not be exaggerating to argue, that, just like the Woman of Worth, the Northern Sotho woman's influence (indirect use of power) could also be felt there. From the proverbs, we observed that society was aware that women could defeat (control) their husbands even if they were not strong physically (*Naswa ya mošate e fenya e sa rage*). A *kgoro* is a traditional place where disputes are settled. It is from this place that the *kgoš*i (chief) and his indunas rule the people. From the Northern Sotho proverbs, we observed that one of the negative stereotypes about women is that they cannot lead. It thus becomes understandable that in a patriarchal Northern Sotho culture, just like in the Israelite culture, only males will be allowed to sit at the city gates. This was also the case with the Nationalist apartheid government. It was basically constituted by men. Such a mentality that women cannot lead the nation, should be challenged. Thanks to the present Government of National Unity with its recognition that the dignity of all human beings, including women, should be acknowledged. It will however be good to see more women in government in the next elections.

We now come to the last quality of the Woman of Worth notable: She does not only care for her family, she cares for the needy.

## 6. THE אִשָּׁת חַיִּל, A CARING WOMAN

As part of their sacred duties, Israelite women were apparently expected to care for the poor. What captures my attention as a Northern Sotho woman is the portrait of a very rich

woman who cares for the poor, not just mentioning the need to care for the poor, not just involved with charity work for the poor, but actually extending (שלח) her hands to reach out to them. In apartheid South Africa, one would think of a picture (a rare one if it ever happened) of a very rich White woman, reaching out her hands to poor Black people.

This caring quality of the Woman of Worth reminds one of the *ubuntu/botho* concept of African culture. We have already noted that compassion and sensitivity to the less privileged, justice and tolerance, rank among the most pertinent norms or values of African humanism. What the אשת חיל does, her generosity and care for the needy, reminds one of what used to be the case in our culture. In a village for example, an elderly person (without children) would not be left all by herself; young girls would visit her to provide her with water, wood, et cetera. Food could even be prepared for her if she was no longer in a position to do it herself. African people, like the אשת חיל, are culturally caring and compassionate people. It is just unfortunate that even such good elements of our culture have been lost and are still being eroded in favour of an individualistic Western culture. Hence the need for approaches such as the one advocated here, in order to revive such good elements which will hopefully contribute to the present Reconstruction and Development Programme that the Government is busy enforcing. This quality of caring for the poor, reminds African women who happen to belong to better classes, to take care of their many poor African sisters, some of them struggling merely to get water.

#### **F. A SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 4**

What we had been anticipating throughout the research, an appropriate African woman's liberationist reading of the biblical text in the South African context, is introduced in this chapter - a *Bosadi* (Womanhood) approach.

This approach is defined and its qualities are outlined here. This is an approach that is committed to the African-ness of an African woman in the country. It thus critically analyses her African context, challenges and resists the oppressive elements of the culture while at the same time it embraces, harnesses the liberative and empowering aspects of this culture particularly as they relate to women.

The approach also analyses the biblical text and its context criticising whatever elements are encouraging oppression and retarding the liberation of women, while promoting the liberative elements. We may thus call a *Bosadi* approach an exercise in transformational hermeneutics (cf Martin 1987:372; Bosch 1991:189) which aims at transforming unjust structures in society so as to end up with an emancipated society.

To get an impression of what ideal womanhood in the African (Northern Sotho) culture means, a survey of Northern Sotho proverbs, dealing with female imagery, is made. The researcher chose the genre of proverbs in line with the theme of the present research which is based on the book of Proverbs in the Hebrew canon. A study of these Northern Sotho proverbs has revealed that women are viewed basically as wives and mothers - that is in their relationship with a male figure - and what they do and must do to make his life comfortable. The proverbs portray both negative and positive images of women.

The information gleaned from these proverbs was subsequently analysed from a *Bosadi* critical perspective, paving the way for a *Bosadi* reading of Proverbs 31:10-31.

From this analysis, a new definition of the African woman emerges: An African female person whose full humanity as a person created in the image of God is acknowledged irrespective of whether she is married or not, or whether she has children or not.



A *Bosadi* approach was then used to re-read Proverbs 31:10-31 in a Northern Sotho context. What comes out of this re-reading, are the qualities that Israelite society might have expected from a woman to qualify as an ideal ('good' or 'wise' to use the sages' terminology) woman. These qualities are then read critically from a *Bosadi* perspective. The result of this re-reading showed that the text has both liberative and oppressive aspects. It is liberative since it elevates the significance of the family (for African males and females), an important institution in traditional Africa. It is liberative because it shows a picture of an independent, powerful woman who can hold her own in the world of men. As Brenner (1993:129) notes, she subverts the male order by becoming its essential requisite.

It is liberative because it acknowledges that women are hard workers. The only problem arises if such hard work tends towards slavery, if it is relegated to only a section of society (as seems to be the case in most of the Northern Sotho contexts where it appears that women are expected to work hard), and also if it is not remunerated fairly. In this case people are better paid on the basis of their race and of their sex. This was typical during the apartheid era. Though the situation is changing today, the repercussions of the previous system will remain for many years and it will continue to have an unfortunate impact on the lives of many African people in the country.

The text is liberative for Africans for it revealed that their holistic outlook on life is similar to that of the Israelites. This will help them realise that the book, which has been dubbed a White man's, contains sections that are closer to their culture than they are to the Western culture.

On the other hand, the text displays its androcentricity by using the unfortunate word בעל for our powerful independent woman. Such an epithet should be resisted as it denies full

humanhood to women, for they are perceived as the property of men. This word also fails to acknowledge the equality between females and males.

The other problematic aspect of our present text is that it may be qualified as a text of the elite class. Such a text, will not appeal to the majority of many poor African women in the country. Even those who happen to be rich, may never hope to achieve the status of the אשת חיל in their lifetime. It may be viewed as an oppressive text of the elitist status quo.

The text is also problematic due to its separation between what appears to be a womanly sphere of the family and the more significant (public) sphere of men - the gates of the city. Such a traditional division between these spheres, on the basis of gender, should be rejected as it does women and society itself injustice. All people should be allowed to exercise their God-given potential as they feel suitable.

Another problematic aspect of Proverbs 31:10-31 (which we have not mentioned before) is its portrayal of an ideal family as one constituted by both male and female, children and servants. That is not always the case in life. We have already noted that many African women may never hope to be like the Woman of Worth in their lifetime - they may never hope to have servants for example, let alone high quality ones! They may never hope to dress like her.

There are many Northern Sotho families which are single-parented, most or almost all these families are headed by women.

Some families are polygynous, yet their members identify with the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Bible. How would women in such families read this text and make

meaning out of it? Will it not serve to reinforce the stereotype of the missionaries that the polygyny practised in African culture shows that it is heathen?

What about those who claim that their homosexual orientation is God-given and that it must therefore be affirmed? They will definitely find the text oppressive.

This information endorses what we have observed, particularly in the first chapter: *To women, the Bible is both an oppressor and liberator!*

## G. END NOTES

1. Nomvuzo Reve (1995) in her mini-dissertation entitled: 'The legitimacy of Jesus: An Afrocentric reading of the birth of Jesus', also prefers womanism to feminism.
2. I would like to thank Dr Phyllis Bird for having made me aware of this point and also encouraging me to coin a term that would be suitable for the Black South African context.
3. Brown does not specifically define the word in its Northern Sotho context. The Tswana word *mosadi* is similar to the Northern Sotho one. Tswana and Northern Sotho fall within the same language group - Sotho.
4. To my knowledge, Itumeleng Mosala is the only African South African biblical scholar who has concerned himself with the class issue in the text albeit from a male perspective. His materialist reading of Old testament texts, I suppose, prompts him to look at the class issue.
5. Personal conversation, Sovenga 1995.
6. In the other collection by Ziervogel & Mokgokong (1975), eight proverbs mention the word *mosadi* as against the twenty that mention the word *monna*.
7. For more details on these themes, refer to Masenya (1989).
8. It is worthy of note that in most or all traditional African societies of South Africa (including the Northern Sotho one), one could not become a wife before going to a mountain school. The latter was necessary for amongst others, teaching the girls what ideal womanhood is.
9. I would like to thank Mr S C N Mokgoatšana for having illuminated these insights about this proverb in our telephone conversation.
10. Masenya M J 1995d. Remarriage for widows in an African context: A far fetched possibility, SABC Radio programme on the topic. Pietersburg.

## CHAPTER 5

### A LAST WORD ON THE BIBLE, WOMEN AND CONTEXT

#### A. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

A review of the work dealt with in this thesis shows that our main concern has been the question of understanding the relationship between the biblical text and its readers. We may reformulate the preceding statement as follows: for women liberation scholars, what counts as a norm? Is the biblical text regarded as a norm for their lives or are their experiences as women more significant than the biblical text? The whole question therefore revolves on the authority of the Bible. From our discussion, we came to realise that feminists, or what I prefer to call women liberation scholars, do not take for granted the traditional understanding of the Bible as the Word of God. For some, as we noted, the experience of women struggling under various forms of oppression should be regarded as a norm for their lives, not the biblical text. For some, however, particularly those feminists who come from a Protestant background, the Bible is both enemy and friend in the sense that it contains both oppressive and liberative elements.

My comparison of Euro-American feminists and African (including the South African) feminists is that the former tend to desacralise the Bible (cf Bird 1995)<sup>1</sup>. This fact becomes clear in their severe critique of the androcentricity of the biblical text. Though African feminists are aware of the androcentricity of the text, the text is still significant to their lives, particularly the Jesus who is proclaimed in the Bible. I must, however, mention that my perception of African women liberation scholars' view of the authority of the Bible in their lives, remains limited by two factors:

- a. Scarcity of scholars in the biblical sciences
- b. Scarcity of books regarding African feminist hermeneutics, a factor which is closely related to the preceding one.

In this concluding chapter, I wish to revisit the question of the authority of the Bible or the authority of the experiences of women readers against the background of the main approach of the present research - the *Bosadi* approach. According to this approach, what should be deemed as significant in our hermeneutical endeavours? The biblical text or the experiences of African (Northern Sotho) women suffering under kyriarchal South Africa? In other words, which one of the two, the Bible or women's experiences, should be regarded as more normative than the other?

As we have observed, particularly in the first and fourth chapters of this thesis, a *Bosadi* approach sets great store by the experiences of Northern Sotho women in their multiple forms of oppression. It argues, like other women liberationist approaches that there is no value-free interpretation of the Bible. Precisely because of this fact, the *Bosadi* approach acknowledges the role played by readers in the production of texts. The readers' experiences will therefore shape the way they read the biblical text. This, however, as I have always argued in this thesis, should not give readers a licence to bring what they want to read into the text, for in that way they will be coercing the text to say what it does not want to say and in that way, their critique of the text as containing male ideology, for example, will not hold water. As they criticise the bias which might exist in the text, they must also be willing to subject their biases to scrutiny. They must also be willing to let the text speak for itself as far as it is possible. I thus argue that we should try as far as possible to honour the integrity of the text, particularly if we understand our hermeneutical endeavours as attempts at a scientific study of the Bible. I therefore, suggest that, in order to reduce the biases that we might bring into the text as we approach it from a woman's liberation perspective, including the *Bosadi* perspective, it might be worthwhile for us to take seriously the context of the text as well. I do not see any

contradiction between the use of historical-criticism and reception criticism in our hermeneutical efforts. The two should be allowed to interact with each other in our attempt to take seriously the context of the (women) readers and the context of the biblical text. I must, however, mention that our use of historical-critical methods, as women liberation scholars, will not be exactly the same as that of traditional White male scholarship. Due to our use of the hermeneutics of suspicion, we ask some new questions which have never been asked before, for example: Can the androcentricity of the text be detected by readers as they read the text? Whose interests did the author serve in his context? What is the class of the author? These questions are prompted by the critique of the kyriarchal nature of the text. I therefore do not see any contradiction between the use of historical-critical and reader-oriented approaches like the *Bosadi* approach.

In my view, both the experiences of women and the authority of the Bible should be taken into account in our hermeneutical efforts. As I have argued in the first chapter of this thesis, the *Bible* has *authority* in my life because it contains the words of life capable of addressing *my experiences* as an African woman in South Africa. If it fails to address my experiences in a life-giving way; if I find that it proclaims death instead of life, oppression instead of liberation, I then question the authority of such sections for my life as a *mosadi*, I challenge and resist such passages as being against the life-giving nature of the God and the Christ proclaimed in the Bible. I therefore acknowledge that the Bible has both oppressive and liberative elements. Like somebody eating fish, a *mosadi* should learn to separate the bones (oppressive elements) from the meat (liberative elements) as she reads the Bible.

The main question of this research has also been an attempt to see if a woman liberationist reading of the text of Proverbs 31:10-31 can offer liberating visions for Northern Sotho women. The hypothesis of this thesis has acknowledged that, if read from an Afrocentric perspective, Proverbs 31:10-31 can offer partially liberating possibilities for Northern Sotho women. This hypothesis was based on the assumption that the Bible, including

Proverbs 31:10-31, contains both oppressive and liberative elements. Our research (cf particularly chapter four of this thesis) has proved our hypothesis to be correct: *If read through a woman's liberationist approach, a Bosadi approach, Proverbs 31:10-31 has both oppressive and liberative elements.*

## **B. A PARTISAN READING OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT**

A reader of this thesis will have noticed right from the beginning of this research and throughout this study, that the reading of the biblical text, which is the main focus of this thesis, has been a reading in favour of a particular group of people; what we may call a partisan or a one-sided reading (Urdang 1991:314) of the text.

Some may call it a subjective reading of the biblical text. Indeed feminists do not hide the subjective nature of their interpretations due to their perception that there is no value-free interpretation of the Bible, hence their critique of the alleged objectivity of past White male scholarship. My reading has been geared at African (Northern Sotho) women in South Africa. The question I wish to address as I conclude this research, is: Are such readings which are aimed at addressing the needs of a particular audience (partisan readings) productive? In other words, are they worth pursuing? As I try to answer these questions, I will at the same time be evaluating the *Bosadi* approach. Such an evaluation is necessary if we hold that socio-critical approaches, like the women liberationist approaches, have to be self-critical if they want to be critical or as they claim to be critical. My evaluation of a partisan (cf the *Bosadi* approach) reading of biblical texts will focus on the advantages as well as the disadvantages of such readings:



1. POSITIVE ASPECTS OF A PARTISAN READING OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

a. A partisan reading of texts helps to do justice to the history of a society, in particular South African society with its tainted history by retrieving and making heard the voices which have been suppressed for many years. South African history was *history* indeed. There is a need to balance this history with *herstory*, to balance the West with Africa. A reading of a biblical text committed to African women readers, like the reading reflected in the present research, has been a step to rectify such imbalances.

b. A 'committed' (partisan) reading of a biblical text is advantageous in the sense that it is localised and thus contextualised (cf Brueggemann 1993). It does not pretend to address for example, the needs of all women readers, as it acknowledges that women's experiences differ from one context to another. Neither does it pretend to address the needs of all African women, the researcher acknowledges the vastness of the African continent and the unity as well as the diversity of African people.

The local and contextual nature of a partisan reading of the text thus helps for purposes of more specificity - for our purposes, the researcher has specifically focused on African women readers in South Africa and how these women should read or re-read the Bible in their own unique context.

c. One other advantage of a 'committed' reading, particularly one committed to the women in South Africa, is that, if applied to the study of the Bible, it helps to make the neglected and so-called 'useless subject', Biblical Studies, relevant to the South African context with its new democratic constitution which endorses the equality of all people. A reading committed to the liberation of women makes the biblical text relevant and alive to all South Africans - both women and men, both

Blacks and Whites. Such a reading makes an exercise in Bible reading no longer a privilege of a few; it becomes a 'people's reading'.

- d. 'Tacit readings' are commendable for they aim at transforming society. Biblical texts are not just read for the sake of entangling ourselves with abstract, sometimes controversial, quasi-objective readings. Many African women in the country cannot afford such a luxury (as noted in the problem statement in chapter one). In the midst of a struggle for survival (cf a hermeneutics of survival of their African-American sisters- Castelli et al 1995), amidst unjust societal structures, appropriate hermeneutics should be transformational.

Partisan readings, however, have their own shortcomings.

## 2. NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF A PARTISAN READING OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

- a. The focus of partisan readings on a particular group of people (cf Northern Sotho/African women in our context), may create the impression that this group is more human than all the others. Post-apartheid South Africa emphasises human and not women's rights. Why foreground women's readings? a sceptical observer may ask. A further question may be: Why African women? Are they the only members of the womenfolk in the country?
- b. The definition of the context of our previously marginalised readers - African women in this case - may also be deceptive, particularly as it is presented in this thesis. Does it mean that the categories of class, race, sex and African culture with its oppressive elements are the only forms of oppression in the life of an African

woman in the country? Nicholson (1989:202) makes a statement almost similar to the preceding question:

Perhaps the assumption that reality has a single structure, which has perpetuated much inconclusive debate about whether gender, race, or class is “the” primary factor in social organization, involves falsely universalizing modes of thinking which are affected by the very forces of domination that feminists are trying to understand and uproot.

One may ask why oppressive factors such as tribalism (amongst Africans themselves), age, being physically challenged, the gap between the rural (North) and urban (South - from the perspective of the location of the present researcher) are not considered. These forces also have an impact on the life of an African woman in the country.

- c. Another danger of a committed reading of a text is that, if it is not sanctioned, it may lapse into subjectivity and eisegesis. Rather than becoming socio-critical, which is to be characterised amongst others, by self-criticism, it may become socio-pragmatic.

At the end of this journey, one last comment is noteworthy: In South African history, the Bible has been used by the powerful - the Whites - to subordinate people of other races; paradoxically the non-Whites embraced the same Bible and used it as a tool for racial liberation.

The Bible has been used, and is still used, by kyriarchal South Africa to subordinate women. What is painful is that at times, the oppressors see this marginalisation and subordination of women inscribed in the biblical text. However negative it might appear to be towards women, the Bible, which is a valuable book for African women of South Africa can be used for their emancipation. Only give them appropriate tools for reading it!

## C. END NOTE

1. Though Bird(1995) was comparing Euro-American feminists with African-American womanists, noting that feminists, unlike womanists, tend to desacralise the Bible, this comparison, also holds for African feminists in the continent. They, like their African-American sisters still have respect for the Bible as a sacred book.

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