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*Making Sense of the
Biblical Portrait:
Toward an Interpretive
Strategy for the “Virtuous
Wife” in Proverbs 31:10-31*

Barbara M. Leung Lai

The portrait of the wife par excellence in Proverbs 31:10-31 appeals to generations of readers, across time, cultures and contexts. As a young girl, I was greatly intrigued by the ‘fairy tale-like’ feel to this portrait. The woman seemed just too ideal to be real! As an adult, I am still amazed by the high standard set by the sages. The fact that the portrait begins with a rhetorical question, “A virtuous wife who can find?” emphasizes the difficulty of such a search. As contemporary Christian women face the constant struggle between family and career, role-expectation and personal aspiration, my peers often find that this portrait exasperates and frustrates them. This resentment creates an obstacle in hearing the text and its intended message. Now as I gain more experience in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, the impetus of coming to

terms with this 'virtuous wife' is still high on the agenda of my interpretive interest. To read this old wisdom classic afresh is both a challenging and inspiring endeavour.

Interpretive Strategy and Objective

In a discussion of interpretive interests, Mark Brett has pointed out the interrelatedness of 'strategy' and 'goal'.¹ Shaped by my own cumulative interests, the ultimate goal of this essay is to move from 'what it meant' to 'what it means' (to the Christian church at large). From the perspective of doing Old Testament theology today, Robert L. Hubbard describes this goal as the examination of both the 'descriptive' and 'normative' aspects of the text.² This 'both-and' operation entails paying due attention to the intrinsic textual elements as well as their normative values in the context of the collective lived experience of the faith community. I seek to describe 'what the text meant' in its original historical context³ and strive to understand 'what the text means to us today' through a two-centre approach: text-centred and reader-oriented.⁴ My reading of the text is therefore a 'both-and' operation, seeking both 'descriptive' and 'normative' aspects of the passage.

My own context as a woman, wife, mother, shepherd-teacher (Eph 4:11) and scholar-saint inevitably shapes the way I hear, interact with and interpret the Proverbs 31:10-31 text. It also contributes to my understanding of how the text relates to the church today. Being a partner in leadership with my husband sharpens my reading of the text in areas that have long been neglected.⁵ Bruce K. Waltke's recent essay, "The Role of the 'Valiant Wife' in the Marketplace"⁶ is a significant contribution in this respect in its affirmation of women's role in business as entrepreneurs. It is my intention here to build on and interact with Waltke's analytical results and seek to carry his interpretation further with additional observations.

In hammering out an interpretive strategy for Proverbs 31:10-31, I have found five promising points of entry. They serve as windows as we strive to make sense out of this biblical portrait. It is my hope that the

results which emerge from each point of entry can cumulatively provide valuable direction toward an interpretation that is more than simply 'suggestive.'⁷

The Figure: A Real Wife or Wisdom's Ideals Personified?

The crux of the interpretation of this poem lies in the ways that the "virtuous wife" (אשה חיל, v. 10) is understood. In the current interpretive scene, she is taken by some as a real figure without ruling out her significance in representing wisdom's ideals.⁸ Others follow the symbolic interpretation and recognize her as Wisdom personified.⁹ There are still others who hold that the portrait is not that of a real woman, but both a representation of the ideal wife and the epitome of wisdom.¹⁰ This line of interpretation has profound implications on the intended message for the first recipients as well as the strategic place of this poem in the book.¹¹ In essence, 'the virtuous wife' serves as a role model for both women and men, an ideal for which all humankind should strive.¹²

As Claudia Camp observes, this conclusion of the book (Prov 31:10-31) corresponds to the prominent role of the feminine figure in the prologue (chs. 1-9). The prologue and epilogue together form the intentional 'inclusio' which frames the collection.¹³ Waltke rightly points out that the similarities between the symbolic Woman Wisdom in 9:1-6 (and other feminine portrayals) and 31:10-31 do not necessarily rule out the understanding of a 'human figure' in 31:10-31. "Similarity does not establish identity."¹⁴ While Woman Wisdom in 9:1-6 is purely symbolic, the real foolish woman in 9:13-16 incarnates folly.¹⁵

Among the feminine figures in the book, the only other occurrence of the phrase "virtuous wife" (אשה חיל) is in 12:4. There it undoubtedly refers to a real woman in the immediate context. On the one hand, by means of an antithetical parallelism, 12:4 balances the sage's teaching towards men (12:3). On the other hand, it reflects the social and cultural contexts of that time where 'honour' and 'shame' are an integral part of a woman's concerns. Syntactically, the other occurrences of (אשה) also

support the real woman/wife designation.¹⁶ This then positions the wife in the historical realm. As Waltke observes, the term is never used as personified Wisdom in 1:20-33; 8:1-36; and 9:1-6.¹⁷

Reading 31:10-11 straightforwardly and contextually, v. 10 does denote the praise of the ‘virtuous wife’ and her worth to her husband. In a didactic context of the royal mother’s teaching to her son Lemuel (31:1-9), no one has challenged the ‘women’ referred to in verse 3 as real life figures. The queen’s warning is set in the life setting of the ancient society of Israel. Given that *Proverbs* is a collection of collections of wisdom materials, it is still a legitimate strategy to read chapter 31 as a cohesive whole. This entails a reading perspective that takes seriously the dominant role of the woman figure (i.e., the king’s mother, the ‘women’ in v. 3 and the ‘virtuous wife’ in v. 10) in the socio-cultural-historical setting as reflected in the text. Coming to terms with the extraordinary ideals that this ‘virtuous wife’ embodies seems to be at the heart of this ‘real wife or wisdom personified’ inquiry. Our preunderstanding often shapes our reading perspective which in turn, shapes our interpretation. In searching for the keys to unlock the message here, it is necessary to move on to the other points of entry.

Form, Structure, Poetics and Function: What is behind the Deliberate, Artful Design?

The analysis of Hebrew poetry has experienced a much welcome revival in recent years. This observation is also reflected in the recent interest in the structural analysis of *Proverbs* 31:10-31.¹⁸ Prov 31:10-31 is one of the most complete acrostic poems (i.e., the first consonant of its 22 verses follows the same sequence as the 22 Hebrew letters) in the Hebrew Bible. As an acrostic, it has its distinct functions and also carries with it inevitable limitations. One way of looking at the limitations of an acrostic is the observation that it contains intentional ambiguities. As Waltke points out, the epigrammatic nature of proverbial literature entails presenting a truth in a most concentrated way and not representing the whole truth.¹⁹ Within the confines of the 22 Hebrew letters in their exact sequence, the purpose of the acrostic may well be to present

a succinct piece that aids memory. The compact nature of the acrostic will naturally leave room for ambiguities. In this sense, even the artful ‘ambiguities’ are deliberate.

If meaning is genre dependent, then what is intended behind the deliberate, artful design? Recent structural-analytical studies point to the fact that there are logical, thematic and structural arrangements beyond the alphabetical sequence.²⁰ Approaching the poem form-critically, Wolters concludes that the ‘valiant woman’ is deliberately described in terms borrowed from a tradition of heroic poetry.²¹ Waltke carries this observation further and has come up with the most far-reaching results through his analysis of the three-fold dimension: form, structure and poetics.²² Focusing solely on the literary aspects, I shall underscore the key elements that are crucial to answering the question posed previously: What is behind the deliberate, artful design?

First, replete with military imagery, the ‘virtuous wife’ is presented as a heroic figure, one who is full of strength and power.²³ The wife in this poem is described primarily through a portrait in verbs. She is depicted as a woman always in action. Her activities are itemized in vv. 13-27, the main body of the poem.²⁴ It is remarkable to observe that all her activities are placed in the domestic (her entire household and the needy in the community) and economic (her cottage industry) realms. Yet, the depiction of her activities and the praise of her values are so significant that they demand a ‘heroicizing’ in the portrayal. In essence, to ‘heroicize’ this wife is to give diction to the idea of (אִי), that she is truly a wife par excellence.

Second, to read the poem as a ‘eulogy’ to the excellent wife,²⁵ three broad-stroke thematic divisions are obvious: (1) an introduction of the virtuous wife and her worth (vv. 10-12); (2) an elaboration of her values by itemizing her activities (vv. 13-27); and (3) a conclusion calling for her praise (vv. 28-31). This reading strategy provides an interpretive key in that her itemized activities are not necessarily set within the 24-hour day time frame. Rather, they could be taken as pointing to different areas of her contribution/accomplishment through her whole lifetime.²⁶

Third, a study of the syntax and poetics of this acrostic further reinforces its thematic unity. Syntactically, an initial verb form (i.e. “she does X”) begins each verse in the first half (vv. 13-18) and an initial non-verbal form is used in the second half (vv. 19-27).²⁷ Poetically, the first half is structured after the alternating pattern and the second half is developed according to the chiasmic pattern.²⁸ As K. C. Hanson observes, Proverbs 31:10-31, as well as the other acrostics in the Hebrew Bible, employ a “variety of interactive structures.”²⁹

These three literary observations collectively point to the fact that a thematic development, a distinct structure and some remarkable poetic techniques can be detected from a detailed analysis of this acrostic which is in the pattern of a heroic hymn. Further, they support the assertion that Prov 31:10-31 goes beyond merely following the sequence of the complete Hebrew alphabet. It is a deliberate, artful piece of literature.

The above conclusion leads to another crucial question: What is then the function of this artful design with such vigorous structure? While the classical theory views poetry as an imitation of reality, the emotional theory “construes it as the spontaneous outpouring of powerful feelings.”³⁰ In terms of the audience’s response, Waltke suggests that the sage and his first audience would have felt “all has been said, from A to Z” and that the poet has fully expressed himself.³¹ If the function of a poem is to engage the feeling and emotion of its readers, then as a reader, I strongly feel that my response goes beyond this sentiment of “something has been expressed fully.” The fact that even the artful ‘ambiguities’ are intentional, leaves more room for its audience/readers to appropriate its message to their own context. As I read on from א to ז (i.e., from A to Z), my interaction with the text escalates and my emotive response abounds.

With regards to the function of this ‘heroic’ acrostic, three modes of emotive escalation could be at work. First, it ascends from the appraisal of her values in the prologue (vv. 10-12) to the inviting call for her praise and reward in the epilogue (vv. 28-31). Second, in the depiction of her accomplishments, the emotive impact upon the audience/readers moves from her contribution to the poor (v. 20) to the household (v. 21), to her own well being (v. 22), to her husband (v. 23), and to the merchants

in the broader community (v. 24). The third area of audience response arises from the description of her strength. It escalates from a depiction of her as energetic (the verbs of actions in vv. 13-18), diligent (“works with diligent hands,” v. 13; vv. 15a, 18b; 27), skillful (v. 19), and physically strong (v. 17) to a depiction of her inner strength (v. 25) and wisdom (v. 26). In essence, I think the vigorous and interactive structures of this poem enhance the emotive response of the reader/audience. I would, furthermore, suggest that is the intended function of this poetic artistry.³²

The Hebrew Concept of Time: A 24-hour Day Description?

As previously mentioned, this ‘virtuous wife’ is depicted as a woman of action. Coming to grips with the boundless activities (basically covering every sphere in life) that her hands perform within the span of a 24-hour day creates significant tension. On this ground, contemporary readers would see her as wisdom’s ideals personified. It appears too unreal if “she gets up while there is still dark” (v. 15a) and “her lamp does not go out at night” (v. 18b).

A crucial step in making sense of this biblical portrait is to understand that the Hebrew concept of time differs fundamentally from contemporary usage. In classical Hebrew mentality, “there is no conceptual separation between an event and the time in which it occurs. Time, like the event or series of occurrences defining it, is a dynamic, phasic phenomenon.”³³ Since there is no abstract concept of time in the Hebrew thought, recognition of time is determined by the events that take place in it. In essence, time is content-determined, highly subjectively perceived, and phasic in nature.

This unique Hebrew conception of time serves as an interpretive key for the sequential listing of the ‘virtuous wife’s’ endless activities. Daily life in the Old Testament tradition is not reckoned on the basis of a 24-hour time period. As Simon DeVries observes, this distinctive time-concept gives definition and quality to one’s existence. Time is perceived as an experience-filled, meaningful continuum.³⁴ Thus it follows that a ‘lifetime’ or ‘life-span’ would refer to the streams of events/occurrences,

which collectively give meaning and relevance to the individual, and which together make up a biography.³⁵ Reading Prov. 30:10-31 as a ‘eulogy’ of the ‘virtuous wife’s’ lifetime accomplishments, covering the different spheres/aspects of her life is therefore, a proper reading strategy.

Textual evidence also supports this reading perspective. “All the days of her life” (כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיהָ, v.12) in the Introduction frames the portrait as one that depicts her experience-filled life span. It makes more sense once we recognize that the whole portrayal is cast within the framework of an acrostic poem, which denotes the distinctive concept of wholeness, completeness, content-filled phasic development (through the sequence of the entire alphabet).

The Uniqueness of this Acrostic Poem among Others in the Hebrew Bible

Fourteen acrostic texts are commonly identified in the Hebrew Bible (Psalms 1, 9/10³⁶, 25, 34, 37, 112, 119, 145; Lam 1, 2, 3, 4; Nah 1:2-8; and Prov 31:10-31).³⁷ Within the constraint of the demanding acrostic form, the authors all seek to embellish their work with fine literary devices and employ interactive structures. Beside these general characteristics, Prov 31:10-31 is unique on two grounds. First, as discussed in the previous section, it fits into the category of “heroic Hymn.”³⁸ While others in the praise-hymn category (e.g. Ps 9/10, 34, 37, 119, 145) are all directed to God as the object of praise, Prov 31:10-31 and Ps 112 are the only occurrences where an acrostic hymn is devoted to a human object. Psalm 112 praises a man, whereas Prov 31 praises a ‘virtuous wife.’ Second, in the context of praise-hymn, Prov 31:10-31 concludes with a double emphatic, the most emphatic ending: an imperative (נָתַן, “give”)³⁹ and a Piel jussive (וַיְהַלְלֶיהָ, “and let ...praise her”) calling for her praise and recognition.

Given the fact that (הָלַל, “praise”) occurs also in vv. 28 and 30, and the fact that vv. 28-31 constitute the conclusion of this episode as well as the Book of Proverbs, this observation is quite remarkable. On the one hand, it relates and underscores the first unique feature - that is that a

human object (a 'virtuous wife') deserves a 'heroic' commendation and honour. On the other hand, at the high point of her appraisal, the sage calls for giving this 'virtuous wife' her proper recognition and rewards. He exhorts, "Give her of the fruit of her hands and let her works praise her in the [city] gates" (v. 31).

The Place of Proverbs 31:10-31 in this Collection of Collected Wisdom Materials

The book of Proverbs is a collection of collections of Wisdom materials.⁴⁰ The question being considered here is this: Is Prov 31:10-31 a fitting conclusion to the whole book, or it is an appendage to the book? Camp affirms that, by virtue of their shared female imagery, the prologue of the book (chs. 1-9) and conclusion (31:10-31) function as an inclusio.⁴¹ If this is deliberate, then what is the intention behind this framing?

Based on the nature of the book, I shall present a number of points with regard to its editorial intentions. (1) As an intentional compilation, guided by divine inspiration, the sages/editors of the work would not have chosen Prov 31:10-31 randomly. The fact that they saw fit to conclude the whole collection with Prov 31:10-31 must be intentional. What is then the divinely driven agenda? We can carry Camp's observation further by proposing that, since Prov 1-9 (the prologue) predominantly presents womanhood as the source of temptation and evil (e.g., chs. 5, 6, 7), the final editor(s) intended to balance the portrayal of womanhood in the conclusion. The call for the praise and reward to the 'virtuous wife' in the literary form of an acrostic heroic poem is most fitting if such a balance is to be sought. (2) Since Prov 31:10-31 concludes the whole collection by employing the acrostic technique, it brings forth the idea of 'totality' and 'completeness.' Further, it highlights the fact that the book of Proverbs is meant for complete, holistic didactic purposes, echoing the purpose of the book as spelled out in 1:1-7. (3) There is little dispute about the first target audience/recipients of the book. It was intended for eligible young men, future leaders in the ancient society of Israel. This emphasis has a sudden twist as the book approaches its con-

clusion, that is the portrayal of the praise and value of the ‘virtuous wife.’ It gives a double message to its first audience in that the qualities of the woman par excellence invite all women of special status to aspire to the same excellence. Furthermore, the poem also encourages all young men to seek after women of such quality. Proverbs thus appeals to its first audience/recipients as a wisdom book for men and women. The contents of chapters 10-30 also place the relevance of the book in the general socio-cultural setting of the ancient society of Israel, and reflect the compiler’s concern for community maintenance. (4) Following the thematic and structural movements of the poem, vv. 28-31 concludes the acrostic. As the depiction of the wife’s values and qualities ascends to the conclusion of the poem (vv. 28-31), she receives praises from members of her immediate family (children, v. 28, and husband, v. 30). Emphatically, the sage calls the whole community to give her the praise and reward she deserves.⁴² Moreover, this recognition has to be carried out in public and in a very prominent place (“let her works praise her in *the [city] gates*”).⁴³ To affirm the strategic place of Prov 31:10-31 in the book is significant, yet to grasp the impact of v. 31 against the original *Sitz im Leben* is even more inspiring.

From What It Meant to What It Means

The cumulative results drawn from the preceding discussion of the five entry points support the following points of departure as we move from ‘what it meant’ to ‘what it means’ to the Christian church at large. It is my intention here to integrate the textual observations and the contextual meaning-making; to move beyond the literary/descriptive elements to normative claims.

What It Meant

To read the ‘virtuous wife’ as a real wife determines the target first audience/recipients. Because of her exceptional qualities and value (vv. 10b-12), young men are encouraged to seek after her and young women are commended to aspire to her as a role model. The fact that this poem begins with a rhetorical question (v. 10a) underscores the difficulty of the search.

The introductory statement in the appraisal (vv. 10b-12) together with the conclusion of the episode (vv. 28-31) place the high point of the portrayal in the familial relationships - her worth to husband and children and the praise she receives from them. The first audience would have known the literary characteristics of a heroic poem, especially if they were (as seems most likely) members of the aristocratic class. They would readily be able to identify this poem as acrostic and would have known the function and deliberate ambiguities of such a genre. Hearing and reading the poem as an informed audience, they would expect a highly articulated portrayal in its totality and completeness. Among other aspects in this heroic-hymn, what would be most striking to them would be her capabilities (in both domestic and economic realms) and strength (both physical and inner strength).⁴⁴

“All the days of her life” (v. 12) sets the stage for the long list of the wife’s activities. Reading this depiction from the perspective of a eulogy, the first readers would have perceived her as a relatively older woman. Through the various accomplishments (in different spheres: domestic, business, community, and her well being) in the different stages of her life, she advances from being an able and strong woman, to one that is full of wisdom, with inner strength and dignity (vv. 25-26).

To the first audience, the surprising notion in this poem would be its ending (vv. 28-31). On the one hand, this conclusion re-sharpens the focus on the praises to the ‘virtuous wife.’ They are from her own children and husband, as a blessed woman (v. 28) and a woman par excellence (vv. 28b-29). On the other, the audience is reminded of the two fleeting physical qualities, charm and beauty, in sharp contrast to the fear of the Lord (“a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” [v. 30b]). In a way, it echoes and restates the motto of the book in 1:7.

Furthermore, the first audience would have been personally implicated as this poem emphatically calls for their proper response in public, “Give her of the fruit of her hands and let her works praise her in the [city] gates” (v. 31).

What It Means to the Christian Church at Large

The context of readers shapes the way they hear the text. Since Prov 31:10-31 is a heroic hymn in praise of a woman, there is no doubt that this poem appeals to generations of woman readers. Some aspire to her qualities and capabilities; others see the portrayal as far too idealistic. Yet there are others who are upset by the role-expectations as reflected here (unless we confine the text's application to the context of the patriarchal society of ancient Israel). For this group, there is still a big gap between the 'then' and 'now,' and thus a huge step is necessary to appropriate its intended message to 21st century Christian readers. If the thrust of completeness and totality is behind this acrostic, our challenge is to present its whole truth and not just pieces of the truth as contained in the text. The intended first audience were eligible young men and women of the ancient society of Israel. However, the concluding imperative ("Give her..." v. 31) is not directed to the young eligible adults only, but to husbands, children and the wider community "at the [city] gates." It is then a legitimate interpretive strategy to appropriate its message to the whole faith community, women and men, single and married, young and old.⁴⁵ As a woman reader, I am proposing here first, a gender-'specific' meaning. This is followed by a faith-seeking-understanding attempt to come up with a more holistic appropriation to the contemporary situatedness of the Christian community.

(1) Christian women should strive for excellence in every sphere of life: domestic responsibilities, career, community engagement, personal well being (vv. 22, 25) and spirituality. The wife so depicted is a woman par excellence in all these aspects. As Waltke sums up, all the superb qualities are in her: "energetic, strong, charitable, competent and skilled entrepreneur and manager."⁴⁶ Reading the portrait as an 'eulogy' is inspiring and also comforting. All Christian women have their whole lifetime to develop and advance in these areas of excellence, in accordance with their God-given potentials and opportunities.

(2) The depiction of her inner strength and spiritual qualities are remarkable. These are the virtues that all Christian women from all walks of life should strive for. She is clothed with ‘strength’ and ‘dignity’ (v. 25a) that correspond to her outstanding appearance — dressed in fine linen and purple (v. 22b). “She can laugh at the days to come” (v. 25b). I am amazed at her inner strength and dignity, qualities which enable her to embrace the future with all its uncertainties with a smile. Yet among all these glamorous descriptions, one summary appraisal stands out: “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (v. 30).

(3) The goodness or benefit she brings to her husband is empowerment (vv. 11, 23). Her husband is respected at the city gate, serving in a position of leadership among the elders (cf. Exod 3:16, 4:29). If v. 31 (“and let her works praise her in the [city] gates”) and v. 23 correspond to each other, and if leadership is defined as ‘empowerment,’ then we have here a portrayal of husband and wife’s partnership in leadership. As the ‘woman in ministry/leadership’ issue and the ‘mutual submission between husband and wife’ controversy (Eph 5:21-33) are still unsettled among denominations today, Prov 31:10-31 provides an affirmative answer for both.

(4) A harmonious family relationship is presented here. Children as well as the household are well cared for (vv. 15, 21). Her children call her blessed (v. 28a); her husband has full confidence in her (v. 11) and praises her as the woman par excellence (v. 30). There is absolutely no conflict between family responsibilities and personal aspirations as both husband and wife, each in their own right, contribute to the community in positions of leadership. The demand for appreciation is called for here - for children to bless their mother, and for husbands to appreciate their spouses. As today’s Christian family still struggles in these areas, Proverbs 31:10-31 serves as a timeless biblical model that calls for our own adaptation in various contexts.

(5) The concluding verse is inspiring (v. 31). If that is the intentional climax of the whole collection as well as the book, please join me in affirming all women in the God-given roles of empowerment. Acknowledge women's contributions as missionaries, homemakers, mothers, wives, pastors and Christian workers. Give them the reward they deserve. Moreover, this recognition has to be proper and in public: "and let her works praise her in the [city] gates."

*My Tribute to Dr. Donald Leggett and Mrs.
Linda Leggett - Shepherd-Teachers*

On the occasion of writing this essay in honour of Dr. Donald Leggett, I have a deep sense of appreciation for him, both as a friend and a colleague. My acquaintance with Linda and Don can be traced back to the year at Tyndale House, Cambridge, as we were both working on research projects in Isaiah, and occasionally fighting for books in that area. As I sat down to work on this essay, what was prominent in my mind was the beautiful portrait of a harmonious family, a mutually empowering and appreciative couple. These impressions have made a lasting impact on me in fulfilling my God-given roles as a woman in ministry, wife, mother, shepherd-teacher, and scholar-saint.

Notes

¹ As a methodological procedure, "any talk about method should be preceded by an analysis of interpretative interests; a 'method' will only be coherent if it is guided by a clearly articulated question or goal." Mark G. Brett, "Four or Five Things to Do with Texts: A Taxonomy of Interpretative Interests," in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J. A. Clines et al. (JSOT Sup 87; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 357-77; quotation from 357.

² "Doing Old Testament Theology Today," in *Studies in Old Testament Theology*, (ed. Robert L. Hubbard Jr., Robert K. Johnston, and Robert P. Meyer; Dallas: Word, 1992) 35.

³ Or 'what the text meant' to its first recipients/audience.

- ⁴ Grant R. Osborne's 'hermeneutical spiral' best explicates the dynamics of this interpretive process. See *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991) 5 - 7. My three criteria for the reader's perspective are Bible believing (2 Tim 3:16); God-fearing (2 Tim 2:15); and faith-seeking-understanding (Rom 1:17).
- ⁵ For example, the possible relationship between v. 23 and the concluding appeal in v. 31.
- ⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, "The Role of the 'Valiant Wife' in the Marketplace," *Cruce* 35 (3, 1999) 23-34.
- ⁷ Scholarly research in the past has been largely focused on the form and structural dimension of this acrostic poem. In my opinion, most studies fail to carry the analytical results to the fullest and to come up with a more holistic interpretation. In this respect, Waltke's "Valiant Wife," (23-34) is a significant step towards this goal. In response to the postmodern ethos, it is also my intention here to arrive at an interpretation that is not merely "suggestive" but "affirmative." Cf. David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, (2d ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 130 where he draws the distinction between "suggestive" and "normative."
- ⁸ See Waltke, "Valiant Wife," esp. 30-31; Al Wolters, "Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form-Critical Analysis," *VT* 38 (1988) 446-57, esp. 455-57.
- ⁹ See Thomas P. McCreesh, "Wisdome as Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31," *RB* 92 (1985) 25-46; repr. in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 391-410. Ignatius G. P. Gous, "Proverbs 31:10-31 – the A to Z of Women Wisdom," *Old Testament Essays* 9 (1996) 35-51. Note that while Claudia V. Camp opts for the wisdom-personified interpretation, she maintains that the portrait cannot be totally removed from a historical context. A full interpretation of the female wisdom figure should be tied to a certain socio-historical locus where such figure could give and receive meaning. See C. V. Camp, *Wisdom and Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (BLS 11; Sheffield: Almond, 1985) 12; and the assessment of this view in Madipoane Masenya, "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Reading for the Liberation of African (Northern Sotho) Woman," *Semeia* 78 (1997) 55- 68, esp. 61. This approach minimizes the gap between the real woman and personified female wisdom interpretations.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Tom Roger Hawkins, "The Meaning and Function of Proverbs 31:10-31 in the Book of Proverbs," (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995); Madipoane Masenya, "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context," 61-62; K. T. Aitken, *Proverbs* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 158.
- ¹¹ I shall return to this issue below in the section on "The Place of Proverbs 31:10-31 in this Collection of Collected Wisdom Materials."
- ¹² See Hawkins, *The Meaning and Functions*, passim; Masenya, "Proverbs 31: 10-31 in a South African Context," 62.
- ¹³ Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 183-91.
- ¹⁴ Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 30.

- ¹⁵Ibid.
- ¹⁶See for example, 9:13; 11:16, 22; 14:1; 18:22; 19:13, 14; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15; 30:20; 31:3.
- ¹⁷Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 30.
- ¹⁸As observed by J. Kenneth Kuntz, "Biblical Hebrew Poetry in Recent Research, Part I," *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 6 (1998) 31. This is also evident in the 1999 Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in Boston. Two papers were devoted to the textual analysis of Proverbs 31:10-31 (Robert E. Longacre, "Proverbs 31:10-31 as a Biblical Hebrew Lyric Poem," and Bruce Waltke, "The Structure of the Valiant Wife [Proverbs 31:10-31]"). See *AARSBL Abstracts* (1999).
- ¹⁹See Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 30.
- ²⁰See Waltke's comprehensive assessment of the structural-analytical results conducted by scholars on this pericope (Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 57).
- ²¹The 7 characteristics that can be found in Prov 30:10-31 are: (1) the description of the woman as manifesting חיל; (2) the recurrence of חיל in v. 29 creating an inclusio; (3) the frequent mention of her "strength" (vv. 17, 25); (4) a number of terms that have military connotation ("plunder" [v. 11], "prey" [v. 15], and the military expressions in vv. 19, 29); (5) the use of the verb חנה (v. 31), a rare verb used in other heroic poetry; (6) the description of the woman's actions rather than her inner feelings or physical appearance; and (7) the evidence of the valiant woman's wealth and social position which indicates that she belongs to the aristocratic class in which honor and individual initiatives ranked highly. For detailed arguments, See Wolters, "Heroic Hymn," passim.
- ²²See Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 25 for additional observations.
- ²³For detailed arguments, cf. Wolters, "Heroic Hymn," esp. 453-57; Waltke, "Valiant Wife," esp. 24-25. See also n. 20 here.
- ²⁴See Wolters, "Heroic Hymn," 454; Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 27.
- ²⁵As suggested by Waltke ("Valiant Wife," 26), I see this reading perspective quite appealing as it serves as an interpretive key to make sense of the sequence of her activities as described here.
- ²⁶I shall come back to this in the following section on "The Hebrew Concept of Time."
- ²⁷Note that Waltke takes v. 19 as the janus to stitch the two halves together without showing the seam. See Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 27-28.
- ²⁸See Murray H. Lichtenstein, "Chiasm and Symmetry in Proverbs 31," *CBQ* 44 (1982) 202-211; Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 27-28.
- ²⁹K. C. Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics: A Form-Critical Study," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation; Claremont Graduate School, 1984) ii; cited in Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 25.

- ³⁰Kuntz, "Biblical Hebrew Poetry in Recent Research, Part I," 32.
- ³¹Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 25.
- ³²As to the function of the acrostic and emotive response, it is interesting to note that in Pamela Jean Owens's analysis of Lamentation 3, she concludes that the acrostic technique is a highly appropriate form for containing the expression of extreme suffering and grief. The alphabet, as a ready metaphor for totality and completeness, serves as an excellent frame for praising God (Pss 111 and 145), or for describing the just man (Psalm 112), or the "virtuous wife" in Prov 31:10-31. See Owen, "Personification and Suffering in Lamentation 3," *Austin Seminary Bulletin* 105 (2, 1990) 75-90.
- ³³Ole J. Thienhaus, "Jewish Time: Ancient Practice, Hellenistic and Modern Habits, Freud's Reclaiming Judaism," *American Jewish Congress* 48 (1999) 442.
- ³⁴Simon John DeVries, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: Time and History in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 31.
- ³⁵Ole J. Thienhaus, "Jewish Time: Ancient Practice," 444-45.
- ³⁶Psalm 9 and 10 together has been identified as constituting a single acrostic poem. Based on the socio-economic-political setting of the two Psalms, they can be read as expressing the experience and aspirations of the marginalized poor. See Walter Bruggemann, "Psalm 9-10: A Counter to Conventional Social Reality," in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis* (Gottwald Festschrift; ed. David Jobling, Peggy L. Day and Gerald T. Sheppard; Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991) 3-15.
- ³⁷For a survey of biblical acrostics, cf. Will Soll, *Psalm 119: Matrix, Form, and Setting* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1991) 11-20. See also Paul W. Gaebelein, "Psalm 34 and other Biblical Acrostics: Evidence from the Aleppo Codex," *Maarav* 5/6 (1990) 127-43.
- ³⁸See n. 20. Cf. also Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 25 for additional observations.
- ³⁹I take (תָּנַחַ) in v. 31 to be from the root תָּנַחַ, ("to give") as opposed to תָּנַחַ (which in the Piel, means "to praise, celebrate"). A number of Old Testament scholars support the latter root meaning. Cf. Waltke's comprehensive treatment of this verb in "The Role of the 'Valiant Wife' in the Market Place," n. 43). My preference is based on two grounds: (1) the latter meaning requires a repointing of the verb form to Piel; and (2) when the imperative (תָּנַחַיָּהּ, "give to her") is followed by a Piel in the jussive (יְהַלְלֶיהָ, with conjunction וְ) "and let ... praise her"), it carries the force of a double emphatic.
- ⁴⁰According to David A. Hubbard, viewing "the book as a collection of collections of wisdom materials" is crucial in the interpretation of Proverbs (*Proverbs* [Dallas: Word, 1989] 18).
- ⁴¹See Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 183-91; also Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 30.
- ⁴²Note the emphatic verb forms used in v. 31.
- ⁴³Cf. v. 23.

⁴⁴Wolters concludes that the use of the heroic poem genre here functions as a polemic against the ancient Near Eastern literature in praise of women, as well as against the intellectual ideals of Hellenism. See Wolters, "Heroic Hymn," 456-57.

⁴⁵In particular, if we read it from the perspective of a 'eulogy,' it means a lot for older women and men as they reflect on the different stages of their life.

⁴⁶Waltke, "Valiant Wife," 29