

A ‘Woman of Courage’: An Interpretation of the Biblical Hebrew Perspective in Relation to Women and Business in Botswana

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Abstract

This essay attempts to read biblical wisdom literature in relation to modern women entrepreneurship. Whereas traditionally in the Setswana culture and many other cultures women are often perceived as sluggish when it comes to doing business, there is reference in the Bible to hardworking women engaging in mercantile or entrepreneurial pursuits for family and society. The paper uses a biblical text namely Proverbs chapter 31 verses 10-31 to encourage Batswana women to work hard and to go beyond small scale to international businesses capable of improving their lives and their communities as well as the nation at large. The paper demonstrates that while previous studies indicate that Batswana women (like many of their African counterparts) take the Bible as an authentic document capable of providing answers to pertinent existential questions, not much has been done with regard to women and entrepreneurship in the Bible. Women’s involvement in business is critical in the creation of wealth and employment as Botswana, like many countries in the world, is grappling with serious issues of unemployment.

Introduction

The biblical text of Proverbs 31:10-31 has received significant theological and academic attention to date. A point which has often attracted the attention of many interpreters and commentators is the portrait of a female figure in such strong terms that to some extent do not correspond to the nature of biblical materials in general (Metlitzki 1986; Fontaine 1998 and Yoder 2003). While previous studies show that the Bible as a whole is androcentric or male-centred in its subject matter, its authorship and its perspectives (Bird 1997 and Bird 1998), Prov. 31:10-31 presents its female subject differently. She is portrayed as a heroine (Wolters 1999, Hurowitz 2001 and Waltke 1999), a woman who is powerful in her own right (Szlos 2000), an industrious and adventurous entrepreneur (Waltke 1999), and a resourceful and selfless woman who is also self-sufficient (McCreech 1985). Different scholars have tackled the text from different contexts and perspectives.

The essay will unfold in the following ways. Firstly, we will start by providing a selected review of some of the literature on Proverbs 31:10-31. The said exercise is important in that it shows that the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 has enjoyed a considerable amount of scholarly interrogations to the present which, however, cannot be dealt with exhaustively here. Secondly, we provide our own translation of the text from the original Hebrew to English which I have adopted from my PhD thesis (Kebaneilwe 2012). The translation serves to orientate the reader to an understanding of the meaning of words and phrases and how I have used them throughout this essay. Thirdly, we give a brief synopsis of the Batswana women and Business since independence in 1966. Finally, we explore the relevance of our text to the contemporary issues of women entrepreneurs in Botswana by suggesting that courage as seen in the woman at the centre of Proverbs 31:10-31, is a vital component in entrepreneurship.

Selected Literature Review on Proverbs 31:10-31

I have already noted that Proverbs 31:10-31 has enjoyed a plethora of interpretations and interrogations from different perspectives and contexts. For the limited purpose of this essay I will look at a selected

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few of such in order to lay a foundation for the present venture. The selection is rather done randomly and is not based on any specific order or preference.

McCreesh (1985) posits that in Proverbs 31:10-31 major themes and ideas of the book of Proverbs are summarized in a statement about wisdom under the image of an industrious, resourceful and selfless wife. Interestingly he notes that the very emphasis of the poem on the woman's many tasks presents an unusual feature in that the husband is left with little or nothing to do. McCreesh (1985) explains away this unusual portrayal of a woman, by contending that the poem is intentionally one sided because it is meant to describe not just any wife, not even the ideal wife but a special, unique wife. It is the description of a wife at the heart and source of everything within her domain; nothing is beneath nor beyond her; nothing is foreign to her and this is because she is primarily a symbol (McCreesh 1985).

Masanya (1997) demonstrates that, read from a *bosadi* /womanhood perspective, the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31 can be empowering for women, in that, being household managers, they are in control of certain activities from which they make a contribution to the family, but such should not be used to confine women to the household. She further indicates that a house wife plays administrative roles in the home and she cites as an example how women in Africa had to (and still do) care for their families alone while their men went away as migrant workers in cities. She also refers to the role of nurturing the children as a woman's role which puts her in a position of power (over her children), and also that in many African homes the woman engages in small business transactions from her house, thus contributing to the household economy (Masanya 1997).

Yet another scholar, namely, Yoder (2003) provides a socioeconomic reading of our text, Prov. 31:10-31. She maintains that there is an indication of the high value of the woman and that, in so far as the woman is ascribed a price, she is a typical Persian-period bride. Accordingly, marriage to a valuable bride afforded a man greater financial resources, which is why 'he does not lack for loot' (Verse 11). Moreover, the woman adds more to the financial security of the family through her business endeavors, her industry of spinning and weaving (Yoder 2003).

Fox (2009) in his recent commentary on Proverbs observes interestingly that throughout the book of Proverbs men's concerns are being addressed and almost exclusively men are described as wise. He argues that in Proverbs 31:10-31 the book concludes by describing a wise woman but that this too is a concern for men. Fox contends that the poem praises the woman's capabilities in bringing income into the home, caring for her household, being charitable to the poor, speaking wisdom and kindness as well as living in the fear of God. He notes that contrary to a common stereotype of ancient Israelite women, the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 has considerable independence in interacting with outsiders and conducting business to the extent that she is even able to purchase real estate (Fox 2009).

It appears that from the limited literature reviewed above, the text of Proverbs 31:10-31 has the potential to be read from different perspectives and to inform different contexts as demonstrated by the different scholars. However, the underlying message of the text seems to be that its subject is a woman who has demonstrated desirable traits. It will be fitting to say that, the portrait here discussed is of a married woman who is hardworking, enterprising and constantly contributing immensely not only to her household economy but to the entire economic situation of her world. Thus, the text is important to the context of the present researcher who lives in an era in which issues of poverty and unemployment are a concern. The literature shows that the woman here described exists within a culture that is male centred as espoused by Fox (2009) above; a culture that has prescribed women's roles as separate from men's and yet she has demonstrated autonomy and prowess and hence her success. However, we will now move onto the translation of the text.

Proverbs 31:10-31

A 'woman of courage' who can find? For her value is far more than corals
The heart of her lord trusts in her and he lacks no spoil.
She does him good and not evil, all the days of her life.
She seeks wool and flax and joyfully works with her palms.
She is like a ship going around; she brings in food from afar.
And she arises still in the night and gives prey to her house and a portion to her maidens.
She considers a field and takes it; from the fruit of her palms she plants a vineyard.
She girds her loins in strength, to strengthen her arms.
She perceives that her gain is good; her lamp will not be quenched in the night.
She stretches out her hands to the spindle-whorl, and 'her palms grasp the whirl of the spindle.
Her palm she spreads out to the poor and her hands she stretches out to the needy.
She will not fear from snow to her house, because all of her house is in scarlet clothing.
Coverings she makes for herself, a garment of six purple.
Her lord is being known in the gates, in his seat with the elders of the land.
Linen garment she makes and sells and belts she gives to the traders.
Strength and honor are her clothing and she laughs at the coming day.
Her mouth she opens in wisdom and the law of kindness is on her tongue.
She watches the ways of her house and does not eat bread of sluggishness.
Her sons arise and call her blessed, her lord; and he praises her.
Many daughters have done courage but you ascend above all of them.
Favor is deception and beauty is nothing; a woman who has fear of Yahweh she shall be praised.
Give to her from the fruit of her hands and let her deeds praise her at the gates (Kebaneilwe 2012).

The above is my own translation of the biblical text of Proverbs 31:10-31 adopted from my PhD Thesis. It is a poem about a woman of courage. The woman is revealed to be of high value, trust worthy and hard-working. She is married for she has a husband, children (sons), and a household with maid servants. She is shown to be a woman engaged in multi-tasking; doing household chores, working with her hands, rising up very early to prepare food for her entire family, and being the last to go to bed. The poem also portrays her as someone who engages in farming, trade outside of her home as she travels to distant places bringing exotic goods for her family and business. She is also engaged in property business. It is further indicated that this hardworking woman produces raw materials like wool and flux to make clothing for her family. She works hard in everything she does and is able to produce surplus to give to the poor and needy in her society.

The final line of the poem is remarkable as it advises that such a woman should be treated as a hero deserving recognition for her hard work, and that she deserves justice. In short, she may be described as industrious, free and independent, physically strong, brave, courageous, prosperous, righteous or honest and upright, and above all, she has business acumen. What we see in Proverbs 31:10-31 is a portrayal of an autonomous and self-driven woman and everything is attributed to her courageous, daring character.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that the 'Woman of Courage' described in Proverbs 31:10-31 demonstrates valuable traits that may prove invaluable to women, especially Botswana women with regard to entrepreneurship. She is an example of what it is like to be a woman, a wife, a mother and yet be successful in business. From her description we learn that she performs all her multifaceted duties with courage, bravery, physical prowess and mental strength. She is a demonstration that, contrary to the conventional gender ideology that suggests that women are weak and vulnerable (Hollander 2002) and by

implication (Mansfield *et al* 2003), women are equally gifted in many tasks just like men. The Hebrew term *hayil* has been used to describe the woman at the centre of Proverbs 31:10-31 is commonly used with males as the subject (Kebaneilwe 2012). In the Proverbs the woman is given the respect and honour as an individual who is able to do anything that her male counterparts can do. Meyers (1998) and Bird (1999) observe that the Hebrew Bible is known for its androcentrism (regarding maleness as normative) and male-centeredness in its subject matter, authorship and perspectives. However, Kebaneilwe (2012) argues that the woman of courage is treated differently. According to Kebaneilwe (2012) she is set out as a polemic and a critique to the patriarchal status quo that characterizes the Hebrew Bible. It is for that reason that this paper attempts to show that the woman of courage is a fitting example for women in Botswana. The reason being that traditional socio-cultural beliefs regarding female gender roles find themselves faring lower than their male counterparts in terms of doing business beyond the informal sector where they dominate (Batsalelwang and Dambe 2015).

The next section looks at the context of Botswana with regard to women and entrepreneurship in Botswana since Independence in 1966. In giving a synopsis of the situation in Botswana the section also reviews literature on the subject of women and business not only in Botswana but other sub-Saharan African countries.

A Synopsis of Women and Business in Botswana Since 1966

Research confirms that in many African countries women have lower levels of income, education and professional skills when compared to men (Owusu and Samatar 1997; Gobagoba and Littrell 2003 and Ntseane 2004). Davis and Abdiyeya (2012) note that a study involving six African countries, namely Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Swaziland and Zimbabwe found out that women entrepreneurs in the said countries are predominantly micro businesses. The situation has been blamed on the issue of gender inequality that abounds in Africa as a whole (Owusu *et al* 1997). Gender imbalance has given men advantage over women in terms of capital, skills and loan accessibility (Owusu *et al* 1997). Previous studies further indicate that in Southern Africa informal economy is a means of survival for many women and many female-headed households (Ntseane 2004 and Batsalelwang *et al.* 2015). Expressing similar sentiments Gobagoba and Littrell (2003) add that women's enterprises especially in developing countries tend to be the smallest of all small and medium-sized businesses. Gobagoba and Littrel (2003) define small-scale or micro enterprises as businesses with fewer than six workers including the owner and an annual income of below US\$11,000.00. The two researchers have further noted that in Botswana 75% of micro enterprises are owned by women and that most of the businesses operate from residential premises. It is also noted that many Botswana women migrate from villages and rural areas to towns and cities where they engage in informal businesses especially street vending (Ntseane 2004 and Daniels 1992). In this collection the same phenomenon is also reported by Gumbo (2010) regarding women in the Chobe District. Most of the businesses are said to either fail dismally or remain at the initial stage of development (Mead 1994 and Daniels 1992).

According to Owusu *et al* (1997) and Maundeni (2016), Botswana was amongst the poorest and least developed countries in the world in 1966. In fact, she is reported to have been the second poorest country in the world after Bangladesh then (Dunning 2005). Unlike other former British colonies Botswana inherited very little in terms of physical and social infrastructure to foster economic development (Owusu *et al* 1997). Magang (2015) elucidates that in 1966 the country was impoverished and benighted with agriculture being the leading economic sector. Since then Botswana embarked on a long and tedious journey of trying to grow out of ashes. One of the priorities at the time was to ensure self sufficiency and hence a number of programmes were established to support especially the agricultural sector which, however, was suffocated by the booming diamond mining industry and beef production (Magang 2015). The

situation led to a significant decline in the arable agricultural sector which reached its lowest in the years 2000/2001 with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 2.4% (Magang 2015). It suffices that over the years following independence a number of programmes were designed to support socio-economic development in the country.

As Magang (2015) asserts, the most notable of the deployed policy instruments included the Arable Lands Development Programme (ALDEP), Financial Assistance Policy (FAP), and Accelerated Rainfed Arable Programme (ARAP). Without detailing the successes and failures of the above mentioned policies whose aim was to ensure the support of local farmers to enable self sufficiency it is noteworthy that the agricultural sector continued to dwindle (Magang 2015). There was now a need to ensure food security which saw the introduction of the National Master Plan for Arable Agriculture and Dairy Development (NAMPAAD) and the Integrated Support Programme for Arable Agricultural Development (ISPAAD) (Magang 2015). All of the above were efforts by the government of Botswana to improve the economic situation. Still, in 2001, the Citizen Entrepreneurial Development Agency (CEDA) was established with the mandate was to provide financial and technical support for business development and sustainable citizen owned business enterprises. The list of programmes goes on to the present day and it cannot be exhausted here given the limited scope of the essay which is to read Prov. 31:10-31 in relation to women and business in Botswana.

It goes without saying that in all its effort to improve the livelihoods of its people, as observable in the above discussion, Botswana has made commendable efforts to curb gender inequality although the problem persists as noted by Maundeni (2016). For instance, the FAP programme included the issue of gender equity in industry as one of its mandates (Owusu *et al* 1997). Furthermore, as a way of empowering especially Batswana, especially women, the government allocates funds to the Women's Affairs Department under the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs (MLHA) annually. The Department offers assistance to women organizations and groups that are promoting gender issues particularly on the areas of concern which were adopted by Botswana Government during the 1995 UN World Conference in Beijing. Despite all the efforts to empower women and to eliminate gender inequality, it appears that women in Botswana continue to lag behind (on a general note) in terms of engaging in business beyond the informal sector. A recent report confirms that women in Botswana dominate the informal business industry (Batsalelwang *et.al.* 2015 and Kapunda *et.al.* 2014). The question is why?

As explained by Seng (1992) women in Botswana were traditionally and culturally considered socially inferior to men and were regarded as minors. Prior to marriage a woman existed under the guardianship of her father. After marriage she was under that of her husband and if the husband died, she transferred to the guardianship of her son or any surviving male relative in the form of levirate marriage or *seantlo* (Seng 1992). According to the traditional custom of *seantlo* a woman who lost her husband would be married to her late husband's brother in order to perpetuate the name of the deceased (Nkomazana 2008 and Tlou 1973). Similarly if a woman passed before her husband, a close relative, usually a younger sister could take her place and marry the widower of her late sister (Denbow and Thebe 2006). I will not dwell much on the issue of *seantlo* as it is not within the purview of this paper. The point to drive home is that traditionally women were not regarded as equal to men. However, in the last fifty years since Independence things have gradually changed. Maundeni (2016) elucidates some of the changes in the following:

In its effort to eliminate discrimination of women, Botswana enacted various anti-discrimination laws. These include the domestic Violence Act of 2008, which seeks to provide survivors of domestic violence with protection; the Abolition of Marital Power in 2004, which empowered women in relation to decision making on family property management; amendments to the Public Service Act to include sexual harassment as a misconduct which can attract penalties under the Public Service Act in 2000; amendments to the Citizenship Act of 1995; amendments to the Mines and

Quarries Act of 1996, which allows women to work underground; the amendment of the Deeds Registry Act of 1996 which ensured that women married in community of property could register immovable property in their names; introduction of a minimum wage for domestic workers and farm work; gender neutral policies as well as the Marriage (Amendment) Act of 2001 which increased marriage age to twenty one for both females and males.

Despite the changes as noted above, Maudeni (2016) maintains that there are several factors that make it difficult to achieve gender equality in Botswana. These include the existing customs and traditions that perpetuate gender inequalities. Cited amongst such traditional mores is the cultural belief that men and not women are the breadwinners and heirs to positions of power and leadership (Maudeni 2016; Kebaneilwe 2012 and Dube 2003). These factors and others will continue to negatively affect and limit the success of women businesses in Botswana. According to a 1992 consultancy report for Women in Business Association (WIBA) which was formed in 1990 through the initiative of the Botswana Confederation of Commerce, Industry and Manpower (BOCCIM) female entrepreneurs perform less than their male counterparts (Nkwe and Raile 1992). The same report indicates that Botswana women are predominantly found in traditional micro and small scale enterprises. While the constraints faced by such women are those encountered by any small business person in the country, theirs are augmented by the complicated reality of being women in the patriarchal society. For instance, many small scale businesses are confronted by lack of funds, lack of training, scarcity of land and so forth (Nkwe *et al* 1992). In addition to these challenges child bearing and child care are the responsibilities of women. The situation is compounded by the women's legal status as 'minors' when married (Ntseane 2004). As studies further show, culturally women are socialised into the stereotypical roles of wife and mother so that marriage and child bearing are idolised to the extent that anything outside of such roles is of lesser recognition by the traditional society (Masenya 1997 and Nfa-Abbenyi 1997). In particular, marriage is an institution in which gender roles are accentuated and reinforced (Dube 2003). Therefore, as Datta (1995) argues, women, especially those who are married, tend to have limited access to resources. They are deprived personal freedom and choices because their identity tends to be submerged in that of their husbands (Datta 1995). This is despite the legal changes as noted on page 5 above.

The above mentioned issues form part of the constraints that women entrepreneurs are faced with in Botswana which are not faced by men. As a result women may find themselves at a disadvantage or in a rather compromised position when they try to venture into business. Datta (1995) observes that in sub-Saharan Africa, Botswana included, women are poorer than men. According to Ntseane (2004), women who engage in business in Botswana, as in many African societies, are also both entrepreneurs and domestic servants for their families and society. Ntseane (2004) further observes that such a state of affairs has persisted despite the Botswana government's effort to bridge the gap between men and women in the socio-economic and political spheres. As Kebaneilwe (2012) suggests, in the absence of any quick fix to gender inequality, women ought to be proactive in order for them to change the course of their lives, their families, communities and the society.

To that end this paper proposes that the woman of courage in Proverbs 31:10-31 offers women good counsel and strength to persist and grow in their businesses. Botswana women who find themselves weighed down in their enterprises by the demands of a culture that has prescribed their roles can draw insights and inspiration from Proverbs 31:10-31. Read for and within the context of women in business the text simply speaks to women to be courageous and work hard to become competitive in business even at the international or global level. Courage is a vital trait for success in business and this is what we now turn our attention to.

Courage as a Vital Component to Success in Entrepreneurship

It is important to note that in Proverbs 31:10-31 the woman at the centre of the poem manages everything she does and succeeds because of one vital ingredient –courage. The description of the woman resonates powerfully with real life experiences of many Batswana women. That is, she is a woman in a patriarchal society of ancient Israel wherein her value is first and foremost placed in her ability as a wife and mother (Fox 2009). She is valued in terms of what she does for her lord (husband) and her sons praise her for being a great mother. It is worth noting that the text uses the title ‘lord’ in reference to the husband of the woman of courage and as maintained by some scholars, the title is indicative of the gender imbalance in ancient Israelite society (Kebaneilwe 2012 and Masenya 1997). The idea expressed here is not a strange one to any Motswana woman born and socialized in the Botswana culture. Consequently, the Batswana women may learn from the text that despite the patriarchal context they may find themselves in, it is up to them to pursue their interests and especially business and not be discouraged by the prejudices they may encounter just because they are women. Still in the text, the woman of courage is further described as a servant who provides good service to her lord, ‘for she does him good and not evil all the days of her life’ (Verse 12). The experience is similar if not the same as what is postulated by Ntseane (2004) as one of the constraints that negatively affect Batswana women in businesses as culture expect them to serve their families, especially their husbands.

The woman described in Proverbs 31:10-31 portrays resilience and courage in her endeavors to succeed in her business and life generally. She is an example of a woman working within and yet against a culture that would otherwise suppress her personal abilities and aspirations. In ancient Israel a woman’s dignity was identified with quiet existence within the boundaries and confines of the domestic world of her house while the public sphere was reserved for men (Lang 1986). On the contrary, the woman of courage transcends the traditional boundaries as she goes about ‘like a merchant ship’ (Verse 14). Thus, she gets involved in business dealings by shrewdly buying, owning and managing land (Verse 16). The above verses are indicative of the woman’s industriousness and importantly reveal that she is proactive, zealous, resourceful, independent and wealthy (McCreesh 1985). Notably, the woman transcends the stereotyping of a woman by engaging in the myriad business activities beyond the culturally prescribed ones.

Batswana women in business could draw strength and courage from the woman of courage who, as already demonstrated in the preceding discussion, does not allow herself to be limited by her circumstances. Though in a culture that would rather have her serve in her lowly position, first as a wife and secondly as a mother, she explores her own potential. Through her courage she performs her culturally prescribed duties well as indicated in the appraisal from her husband and children (Verse 28). While doing this she overcomes the otherwise suppressive culture by going beyond traditionally prescribed roles to explore her full capabilities as a gifted business woman. Consequently she receives recognition and respect for so doing (Verse 31). She makes a legacy for herself through courage and hard work.

The concluding line (namely Verse 31) is remarkable as it sets out a paradigm shift and calls for a reconstruction of the state of affairs. It is a call to the authorities at the gates (those in power) to pay tribute and respect to a well deserving woman. The ‘gates’ here referred to, were a male dominated and male controlled space in Israel (Lang 1986). It was at the city gates in ancient Israel that important decisions were made and legal matters were negotiated by elders who were exclusively male (Lang 1986). However, the deeds of a courageous hard working woman bring a turnaround to the status quo as the poet demands that the woman be duly recognized and her name praised at the gates. In that way the poem about the woman of courage becomes a polemic one and a critique of the patriarchal status quo that allotted women marginal places and roles in society. She penetrates unimaginable spaces and transcends heights because of her courage. She is not a super woman but rather a woman working courageously and navigating her way through a socio-cultural system that may not easily support her to realize her full potential.

Noteworthy too is Botswana's Vision 2016, which envisaged that by this year, Botswana must adopt bold strategies for industrialization, especially manufacturing for export. Botswana should pursue the opportunities presented by small niche markets in the region and beyond (Republic of Botswana 1997). Thus, it is high time women in Botswana courageously explore opportunities to grow their business bigger and better in order to increase their income and to create employment for others. An inspiring example in that regard is the Sprint Couriers; a female-owned business that has been listed among the leading logistics companies in Botswana (Baatweng 2015). The company is said to have grown 'from being a small operation of six vehicles, 16 employees and five offices in 2006 that now boasts of 100 vehicles, over 168 employees and 16 offices. This growth has made it possible for the company to expand into South Africa and Zimbabwe (Baatweng 2015). There is need for more women to follow suit.

Conclusion

What this paper suggests is that like the woman of courage in Proverbs 31:10-31, Botswana women live in a culture with accentuated gender roles. It is evident from the discussion in this essay that women in business are almost exclusively found in small scale and informal enterprises. They also face more complex challenges than their male counterparts. This is despite the few progressive changes that have taken place since Independence regarding the status of women in Botswana. While the government tries to improve the status of women and eliminate gender inequality, the problem is complicated by the lurking cultural beliefs and values embedded in patriarchy.

As a result, women-owned businesses generally continue to be smaller than those owned by men. However we have also noted that it is not impossible for women to transcend the challenges and stereotypes in order to excel in their businesses. That is, while we appreciate women's informal trading businesses of selling second-hand clothing, perfumes, catering services and others as contributing to the welfare of families and economic diversification of the country, women need to get encouraged to aspire for more and much bigger businesses with significant wealth and employment creation.

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