

### **Proverbs Entrepreneurial Lessons for Today: Proverbs 31:10-31**

Much discussion has been provoked in feminist circles regarding Prov 31:10-31 (Claassens, 2016). The poem is an alphabetical acrostic poem devoted to a female character who is considered a “worthy woman” (GOH, 2014). Applying socio-rhetorical critical analysis can help organize the message of the text. Robbins (2012, p. 1) posits socio-rhetorical criticism as “an approach to literature that focuses on values, convictions, and beliefs both in the texts we read and in the world in which we live”. The approach moves interactively into the world of the original author and into our present world. Five angles of socio-rhetorical criticism are used to the textures within texts: 1) inner texture focus on removing all meaning from the words, giving attention to the ‘words’ themselves; 2) intertexture is the interaction of the text with the “world” outside the text; 3) social and cultural texture examines the text’s social and cultural nature; 4) ideological texture focus on the relation of one person’s dispositions and values held with the group; 5) sacred texture refers to the relation in the text between human life and the divine (2012). Applying ideological texture analysis to the text will reveal the application of the values and ideology practiced by the “worthy woman” (GOH, 2014) to the modern audience. This will uncover the relationship in Prov 31:10-31 of the “worthy woman” to other people and the social and cultural location. The goal of this work is to deepen the understanding of the way biblical wisdom relates to entrepreneurship and the decision-making processes of leadership.

#### **IDEOLOGICAL TEXTURE**

Robbins (2012) notes that the perspective of the authors and audience, and the social, cultural, and individual location are the issue. People make up the primary subject of ideological analysis and interpretation. Inner texture focus on the meaning of the “words” in the text, and “ideological texture. Concerns the biases, opinions, preferences, and stereotypes of a particular writer and a particular reader (2012, p. 95)” regarding the text. During the analysis one or more texts are analyzed with the text that is in the foreground of interest. All cultures consist of an integrated system of shared beliefs, basic assumptions, and core values (GOH, 2014) that the group depends on for survival (Schein, 2010). This system make up the ideology which represents the shared views of reality of the group (Robbins, 2012). Four ideological textures are identified: 1) Individual locations; 2) Relation to groups; 3) Modes of intellectual discourse; and 4) Spheres of ideology. This

text, Prov 31:10-31, includes spheres of ideology. It is necessary to analyze the spectrum of the social and cultural data built into the language of the text (Robbins, 2012). The poem breaks from poetry of the time period's praise of the physical charm of women and celebrates her ordinary domestic lifestyle (Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31*, 2005). People should resist defending actions that are not ethical and embracing doing things the way they have always been done especially ones that contribute to oppression and suffering (Claassens, 2016).

### **Her Value vv10-12**

There is no consensus agreement of the authorship of Prov 31:10-31. Lemuel is accredited to authoring 31:1-9 which at the least served as an inspiration for several verses. The author begins the poem with the rhetorical question "... who can find? (v 10 ESV) aimed at enticing the audience to take note of a woman females should attempt to model their ways after and for males to seek out as a wife. This woman is rare, attractive and precious. She is selfless. She uses her strength, ability, wisdom, and valor for the benefit of others. The valiant wife loves and fears the Lord and enjoys a robust spiritual relationship. Like a soldier, through strategy, timely strength and risk she wins the essentials for her husband (Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31*, 2005).

### **Her Sources of Revenue vv 13-18**

The author describes a woman who is resourceful:

- She works the raw textiles with her hands (v 13).
- Trades with merchants to enrich the table (v 14).
- Arises at night to provide for her household and care for her maidens (v 15).
- Invests her earnings in a vineyard (v16)
- Dresses herself with strength and dignity (v17-18a; v25).
- Recognizes and believes her products will bring profit (v 18a) (Waltke, 2005).

The cottage industry is the basis of her economic gains. She trades raw textiles that she produces with her hands. With the surplus of her income from weaving she purchases her vineyard. He is not a sluggard, she rises while it is still dark. Positive emotions drive her. Flax is processed by pulling the plant out of the ground with the root and allowing it to dry

on the roof. Flax and wool were used for sewing clothing. Her manufacturing of textiles to her trade is manifested in verses 14-15. Spinning and weaving skills were admired and desired. The cost for woolen garments was over two months' wages. Inexpensive linen costed a half of one's month's wage. Her trading was strategically planned, diligently executed, and ventured. The enterprise she built was ongoing and not a onetime event. "... Food from afar... (v14) indicates foreign delicacies (Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31*, 2005). Her interests spread far from the local community.

Waltke (2005) likens the valiant woman to a lioness the way she preys with great strength, prowess, and ingenuity at night putting the needs of her family before her own comfort (v 15). Tremendous physical (v 17) and psychic energy (v 18) exuded in escalating her economic base. Although the valiant woman had servant girls (v 15), and undoubtedly employed male slaves for much of the work in the vineyard, she was not above menial labor. This reveals a purpose and usefulness of her strong body parts. She remained spiritually and physically motivated and prepared for hard work and to accomplish it (Waltke, 2005).

### **Works in the Community 31:19-27**

A distaff (v 19) is a tool used for spinning raw materials. Waltke (2005) posits verse 19 as a link between verses 10-18 to verses 20-27. This effectively links the valiant wife's abilities to her willingness to contribute to the household and the community. As demonstrated in verses 20-22, she made contributions to the poor, the household, to herself, and to her husband. The evidence that the valiant wife made contributions to her husband as a person and not only as a part of the household should not get overlooked or downplayed. It reinforces why his heart trusts her (v 11). Her contributions to her husband empowers him to lead in righteousness and justice in not only the household but the nation. She demonstrated an understanding of hierarchical escalation. A place for the afflicted and powerless and disadvantaged (v 9) is provided in her ministry. She meets this need when she spreads her hand (v19). The spreading out of her palm (v 20) signifies her inviting others into her home or to give material aid (Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31*, 2005). The anticipation of danger (v 20) and adversity (v 24) does not agitate her. Strength and honor enable her to overcome any foe. The valiant woman empowers her husband and teach her household by asserting her unstinting diligence watches vigilantly over her affairs. Her husband celebrates her loving and wise teaching (vv28-29) and encourages her to share with him (Eph 5:21; Waltke 2005).

## Ideological Texture

The female actor in Prov 31:10-31 is assigned the titles “woman of worth” (Apple, 2011)“, worthy woman” (GOH, 2014), “virtuous woman”, “capable wife”, “noble woman”, “good wife”, “woman of strength” (Claassens, 2016), “woman of valorous virtue”, “woman of valor”, and “the valiant wife” (Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31*, 2005). All of these titles are valid for the woman in the texts. For the sake of consistency, this author will refer to the female actor in the texts as “virtuous woman”. What is virtuous? Virtuous is used in the King James Version and is from Latin *virtus* which means manly excellence. As it fits with the virtuous woman describing how she “dresses herself with strength (v17)”. The virtuous woman is noted to have “competent strength” (Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31*, 2005). The author demonstrates through the lens of the virtuous woman what the ways and actions of an entrepreneur should look like. There are many words that can serve as descriptions of her attributes. The list provided by this author is not an exhaustive list of her qualities, attributes, nor virtues. The woman found in Greek literature is the silent, “homebody” type spouse. Unlike the wife found in Greek literature the virtuous woman is diligent, a take charge leader, a wise teacher (v26) and philanthropist, and a profit-making entrepreneur (Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31*, 2005). There are many descriptive words. Waltke’s (2005) list includes: valiant, rare (v10), precious (10), trustworthy (v11), energetic, not a sluggard (v 13), resourceful (v 16), strong (v17), kind to the poor (v20), fortified (v 21), wise and loving teacher (v 26), and pious (v 30).

McCreesh rejects the poem and the qualities as a literal interpretation of a woman mainly arguing that it leaves the husband with little to do (2005). Goh (2014) found that the virtuous woman shared some qualities with Ruth. Ruth not only fit the descriptors of the virtuous woman, the portrayal of Ruth is better. The term in the original text (v10) is applied to Ruth also. The application highlights the importance of their status. “The term refers to “physical strength” or “power” (Eccl 12:3; Ps 33:17), or military might ( Pss 18:32,33,39,40), also may denote financial power (GOH, 2014, p. 490)”. Another similarity is that Ruth’s works is known as a worthy woman by the townsmen (Ruth 3:11 ESV) just as the virtuous woman “deserve praise from the assembly at the city gate (2014, p. 490)”. More importantly both women fear the Lord (v 30; Ruth 1:16) and both are mediators of Yahweh’s blessings to their house (v 30; Ruth 3:17, 4:17; (GOH, 2014). Later, “McCreesh undermines his own argument by noting in his conclusion that the valiant wife of this poem has striking parallels with Ruth, a real woman (Waltke, *The New International*

Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs Chapter 15-31, 2005)". The comparison to Ruth is important in this instance that it clarifies that 'this woman' exists and we should accept the poem as a literal interpretation. The virtuous woman found the capacity to multitask effectively. She managed multiple businesses and a house and empowered her husband (Claassens, 2016).

### **Application**

The model exists of the values and characteristics necessary for an entrepreneur to establish and lead an organization in a God-fearing manner. The standard for the virtuous entrepreneur was established in Prov 32:10-31. In verse 10 it was established that almost no one can find a virtuous woman (Waltke, The book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31 Kindle Edition, 2005).

Present day entrepreneurs place a higher value on achievement, respect, and initiative than non- entrepreneurs in the market (Terrell & Troilo, 2010). Research shows that global social entrepreneurs who are creative, passionate, have perseverance, integrity, and empathy are more likely to succeed. Social entrepreneurs pursuit social as well as financial goals. Integrity helps to prevent mission drift. Integrity helps them remain loyal and committed to the social mission (Van Niekerk, Cant, & Wiid, 2014).

Terrell and Troilo (2010) found several factors limiting the woman's place in entrepreneurship. In contrast to the virtuous woman, present day women are not participating in the labor force due to complication related to responsibilities of their family roles (Terrell & Troilo, 2010). "Many women today are working two or three jobs just to get by an even that does not suffice (Claassens, 2016, p. 15)". They are more conscious of balancing home life with business than men. For other women entrepreneurs, independence, security, and personal satisfaction are the values considered. Women who become entrepreneurs do so out of consideration for her family. It offers her more flexibility for family time and responsibilities (Terrell & Troilo, 2010). This thought process and cultural conformity seems far removed from that of the virtuous woman. Claasans (2016, p. 8) argues that "harmful cultural customs ought to be challenged and transformed". The virtuous woman considered her family also, but from another perspective. She supplied her family with not only goods, but luxury goods. She was not confined to her home. The virtuous woman wielded control over her environment and protected her family against extreme weather (v 21) (Claassens, 2016).

Low standards of moral values such as deceitfulness pilfering, deception, enticement, and prejudice are not desired qualities. Terrell and Troilo (2010) posits that people are more

likely to sacrifice their own morals and values in times of hardship. Venture capitalists face difficulties monitoring the success of social enterprises. Empirical evidence indicates data of social entrepreneurs but does not directly line it to any behavioral patterns (Van Niekerk, Cant, & Wiid, 2014). The virtuous woman exercised her ability to imagine, think, and reason (Claassens, 2016). The present-day entrepreneur should strive to achieve the virtues of the virtuous woman and sharpen the skills necessary to plan trading prudently, execute it diligently, and venture into enterprises (Waltke, *The book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31* Kindle Edition, 2005).

Entrepreneurs must rely on evidence-based inputs in the decision process (Tingling & Brydon, 2010) to plan an effective strategy. The subjective beliefs and preferences are either confirmed or disconfirmed by evidence based data (Tingling & Brydon, 2010). An informed leadership team can create a competitive advantage by understanding the new information (May, 2009). Quantitative evidence should always remain an option especially since technology has advanced to the point that it is possible to make decisions with minimal human intervention. Quantitative evidence at times is more fitting than qualitative or noneconomic factors in the decision-making process (Tingling & Brydon, 2010).

The process of executing a plan should include an entrepreneur leveraging knowledge (May, 2009). The virtuous woman did not fear the future (v 25) and was neither anxious nor fearful (Claassens, 2016). Leaders should resist making decision under pressure with incomplete information (Baba & HakemZadeh, 2012). Inaccurate inputs produce ambiguous data leading to the decision-makers making a decision based on ambiguous data (Tingling & Brydon, 2010).

Through leveraging knowledge and entrepreneur can improve his or her standing in the community (May, 2009). Ultimately, negative decision-based evidence is the responsibility of the leadership. Decision makers must understand how waiting for better information will affect the organization compared to acting prematurely (Chalkidou, Lord, Fischer, & LittleJohns, 2008). Both can result in potential consequences. Therefore, leadership must weigh the risks, costs, and benefits of the evidence (Tingling & Brydon, 2010). Just as the virtuous woman, entrepreneurs should have a fear of Yahweh in order to bring prosperity (GOH, 2014) to their organization.

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