

The “Woman of Substance” (Proverbs 31:10-31) and Ecclesiastical Dignity in Nigeria

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Abstract. There have been agitations and quests for women inclusion in church leadership. While these engagements had produced some results there is still room for more improvement. There are women with virtues and strength of character like the “woman of substance” in Proverbs 31:10-31 who would be of great benefit to ecclesiastical dignity if given opportunity to serve at the top echelon of church leadership. The study employed synchronic and existential methods in analysing the biblical text within the context of contemporary realities in Nigeria. The church in Nigeria would be better equipped to face the challenge of inadequate efficient and trustworthy leaders if hardworking, focused, virtuous, women are given a chance to work in partnership with the few committed men in ministry.

Keywords: Proverb 31, Women of virtue, Nigeria, Church Leadership

1. Introduction

A life characterized by virtues is one that builds and sustains any society that desires dramatic growth and social dynamism. This is because it entails good quality and asset that fosters development, produces advancement and nourishment. The need for virtuous women in sensitive positions whether in the family, in society, and even in religious settings cannot be overemphasised. They play unique roles in the growth and development of every society. There is no sphere where her service is not needed.

The book of Proverbs is prized by Christians, old and young, because it preserves ancient instructions that

were codified to help prepare young men for life and leadership.

The church in Nigeria, to a large extent, has downplayed the role of women of substance and integrity, in ecclesiastical hierarchy. Virtuous lifestyle is no longer considered as requisite rather wealth, influence, and affluence have been the yardsticks for appointing people into church leadership positions. Some are occupying church leadership positions based on their connections and political affiliations, this has been detrimental to the growth of the church and has affected the quality of leadership both in the church and society.

According to Biwul (2013) wisdom is personified as the female figure in Proverbs 31:10-31, this virtuous woman is a role model and an epitome of womanhood and motherhood for all women, wives, and mothers of all generations in African culture. Her household and the society at large benefit from her virtues. On account of her virtue and industry in the home-front, her husband earns respect and recognition from the society. Also, her children praise her for being a good mother. Such women are needed in the church’s leadership hierarchy in Nigeria to add values to the church ministry and bring their virtues and skills to play in ecclesiastical obligations

2. The Role of Women in Ancient Near East

In the ancient world, women used their words to bring change in the society. The wise women of the Hittites provided archival resources on women using words with mantic force as they bring about

behavioural change. Fontaine, (1987) notes the Hittite wise woman's manipulation of language to empower her ritual actions is the pious prayer of a Late Bronze Age, Hittite Queen who uses proverbs to wheedle the gods and goddesses into granting her prayerful request. In this instance "Queen Pudukhepa of the Late Bronze Age Hittite empire... used proverbs to achieve her goals in dealing with the gods" (Fontaine, 1987).

Motherhood in the ancient world indicates half standard antithetical world pair (father/mother), an instructional tool much favoured by the Sages in their discourse on parental prudence, responsibilities, and control (Fontaine, 2002). The mother is the epitome of power and influence per excellence because she is a mother, and, at some point in her life, probably the mistress of her domestic unit. As such, she is a powerful presence in the home, exemplifying domestic organization, propriety, and the child's first contact with religious and ethical instruction (Fontaine, 2002). Because of her role, she pays special attention to tutor her children and secure their future in society. This is because her children's behaviour is a product of her domestic affair.

Ancient female work in processing the subsistence materials of their household relating to food and textiles gave women a working knowledge of the effects of plant and animal products, minerals, and other substances that typically form the bulk of the folk medicine pharmacopeia. In other areas of the domestic division of labour, women's production of textiles made them the producers of other materials needed in healing practice: bandages, wool materials, clay or wax figurines, and so on, all used for healing purposes (Fontaine, 2002).

It should be noted that the bedrock of any society is the home where the woman exercises her potentials to the fullness. Schottruff (1991:93) notes that as a wife, she performed certain roles which include grinding, baking, washing, cooking, feeding baby, making the bed, working with wool, feeding the children for 18 to 24 months, and washing her husband's face, hands and feet; in all, obedience to the husband is mandatory.

The domestic activities of the ancient women were also extended to the public. Albertz, notes "Women, however, were at times influential in public life." (2012:14). These roles too found their way into the public arena when enterprising women took the lessons they had learned in the home out into the town or village. Fontaine (2002) discloses that "When the Bible speaks of 'public' women—Deborah, Bath-Sheba, Queen Sheba, Jezebel, Athalia,

Huldah—taking assertive roles in political dealings and political contexts always suggest some socio-economic power base at work such characters and their doings cannot be regarded as mere fictions.

Another significant public role of women in ancient Israel is conflict management. Camp, (1981) discloses that "One of the most critical features of Israel's wise women was, their excellent and timely use of language in the resolution of conflicts (2 Sam. 14, 20)". Like any male sage, they take up their public role without hesitation and with an expectation of being heard and valued, although 'mother' imagery is used to 'authorize' their interventions, at least in part (Fontaine, 2002). Proverbs and proverbial phrases were the tools of the sage, fall from their lips as needed, and are as efficacious as the counsels of their brothers in the craft (2 Sam. 14.14; 20.18).

Legally, the Jewish women's education would have included little more than the domestic arts taught by their mother. Women probably learned to read and write and were given elementary religious instruction enough to pass on to their children.

Hallo (1976) points out that girls lack the opportunity for education, but some women somehow acquired considerable knowledge of the *Torah* and even of other subjects. Fontaine (2002) discloses that "it is still true that some few women did find their way into the scribal elite and may even be reckoned as successful practitioners of that high literary art." Other Mesopotamian women may also have composed extant texts and some served as scribes. Oderinde (2012) opines that there are records of some *rabbis* who had wives learned in the law, such as Beruria the daughter of Rabbi Hananya ben Terayon, and the wife of Rabbi Meir and Imma Shalom, the wife of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus who were learned and displayed a sound knowledge of the *Torah* to the extent of guiding men to understand the Law if not for the aforementioned women, there was no full-fledged independence of women in Judaism. This is clear in the submission of Fontaine (2002:61) mentioning that the queen mother who speaks in Proverbs 31 gives ample evidence of 'the Mother's Torah' ('teaching').

The Old Testament, no doubt, has high regard for women's religious rights, as a result "women are all respected for their righteous actions." (Levine, 1998: 340-341). But the women were excluded from most religious leadership and activities because, under the religious codes in Leviticus 15, women could not be depended upon to be ritually clean at all times due to

their monthly menstrual period. In the religious life, she participates in the Sabbath duties mainly in the rejoicing and worship before the Lord but with caution to where she can stay in the temple. .

Few women occupied leadership positions in the Old Testament among such were; Miriam the prophetess (Exod. 15:20), Deborah who occupied four distinguished positions in Israel (Judg. 4:4), Huldah a prophetess (2 Kings 22:12-20), the wife of Isaiah the prophet who was a prophetess (Isa 8:3), Noadiah (Neh. 6:10-1) and other false prophetesses (Ezek. 13) because they were women, little is known and recorded about them and their offices (Gladson, 1984).

3. Proverbs in Ancient Israel

Ancient biblical sages devoted much of their time observing the mundane activities taking place around them and trying to put their acquired knowledge to optimal use. The sages' task involved the mental processing of information about reality and its analogical application to conduct (Gerhard, 1972). They did not always limit their gaze to the ordinary, however, for they occasionally cast their eyes toward the mystery of human origins and final destiny, together with the necessities for life itself. For this cause, they made use of proverbs.

A proverb is a succinct and persuasive saying proven truth by experience. It could be noted that the sages composed the proverbs out of oral tradition as a literary creation. Meyers (1989) underscores that sages are any persons who routinely perform one or more of the following tasks associated with the wisdom tradition: authorship, scribal duties (copying, collecting, editing), counseling, skilled production and/or management of economic resources (especially were confirmed by the text itself), conflict resolution, teaching, mourning, and healing. By using this broader definition, one could number women among the sages because of their practice, even where one cannot attribute authorship of specific texts to them.

Another strategy made by the writers of proverbs is to make an artful 'comment' on a particular 'topic', again intending to structure the hearer's choices along a particular path. While the form may masquerade as neutral in its observations on life, in reality, it is anything but impersonal or disinterested! The saying form that predominates in Proverbs, so often depicting life from the male vantage point of genuine choice and full of moral agency, displaces the everyday experience of women, who neither have such choices available to them nor are they viewed

by the male culture, for the most part, as full moral agents. Their displaced voice must echo from below the text, forced to chant along docilely with the majority view (Fontaine, 2002).

Meyers (1989: 142-60) accounts that the biblical proverb form with its inherent dependence on dualities, is thus a gendered one, whether it contains explicit male/female content or not. Choose between these two! Demand the scribal teachers of their male students, invoking parental authority to undergird the role of the teacher. Thus is the patriarchal economy of thought preserved and inscribed. It deploys the sensitive role of the teacher in the ancient world.

Amid Israel's culture, which self-consciously emphasized its theological 'uniqueness', the sages worked with the connections and similarities of their teachings to those of their neighbours, creating a kind of intellectual ecumenism, as it were. They were wise precisely because they honed their thought on the wisdom of the ages and the experience of the cultures that preceded and surrounded them (Lasor, 1996). This gives them recognition and makes them relevant in their world.

Hebrew poets usually project Israel as a covenant community. As such, the wisdom authors in the book of Proverbs aim at applying the belief of Israel's covenant faith as primordial to daily attitudes, activities, and relationships in her society (Lasor, 1996). In the private domain, the mother's roles in teaching, counselling, and conflict resolution within the home are also tasks that qualified her as a practitioner of wisdom. The woman of substance in Proverbs 31:10-31 is the symbol of wisdom.

Proverbs 1:7 states that the fear of Yahweh is the *rē'šit* of knowledge. Religious devotion, that is, lies at the heart of the intellectual enterprise (James, 2007:105-106). The woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 deserves praise for her ability, strength, labour, hard work, insight. and devotion to the domestic and business transactions. All these were collections of sages' intent skill about teaching on a particular topic.

4. Authorship and Date of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is traditionally believed to have been authored by King Solomon the third king of Israel in around 970-930 BC. However, the book was a collection of the individual composers and editors but because of Solomon's quest for wisdom, his ruling status, the opening verse of the book made him the author of Proverbs. Dell (2006) suggests that "the

important aspect of the Solomonic attribution is that it places Proverbs at the heart of Israelite wisdom literature and gives voice to Solomon's renowned 'three thousand proverbs' (1 Kings 4:32)." From a different perspective, Murphy (1998: 25) says: For centuries Solomon was the putative author of this book, due to the venerable tradition about his wisdom (1 Kgs 3:10; 5:9–14), and the superscription of the work (1:1). There is now almost universal agreement that he cannot be considered the "author." Within the book are several collections, some of them ascribed to "authors" other than Solomon. Moreover, there are no available means to identify any proverbs as "Solomonic." It seems to be the nature of ancient proverbs that they lose their "author" as they become popular and perhaps even improved in the process. While the dating of the book of Proverbs remains uncertain, the most satisfactory division is pre-exilic and post-exilic (respectively, chaps. 10–29 and 1–9). Based on Murphy's (1998) submission, Solomon could not be considered as the author of Proverbs since it contains collections of sages' sayings.

Dell (2006) admits that the author of chapter 31 is not clear due to the opening statement of this chapter: "The words of Agur, son of Jakeh of Massa" (v. 1a). Scholars did not know who the name is associated with in Israel. The designation 'of Massa', probably the north Arabian tribe mentioned in Genesis 25:14 and 1Chronicles 1:30 as a son of Ishmael (alternatively translated 'the oracle'), would seem to confirm this. It introduces the wisdom of a particular person (Dell, 2006).

Due to the above submissions, the book of Proverbs contains several authors and a specific date cannot be attached. Because of this, Whybray (1994) concludes that the book of Proverbs is "a collection of collections, in that different parts of the book of Proverbs, were probably composed separately." Many of the sayings were derived from an oral tradition beginning from the monarchy till the post-exilic period. On this note, a specific date cannot be given.

The hymn is in the tradition of heroic poetry, and it also contains a critique (cf. v 30) of the erotic praise of women in the ancient Near East.

Scholars differ in the interpretation of this woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 Murphy, (1998:245) proposes that the woman is "an idealized portrait of a wise wife in an ideal household in an ideal society." However, for her the idealistic description blends into the symbol of Woman Wisdom: the wise wife is "the mediator of Yahweh's blessings to the house: it is through her work and her 'fear of Yahweh' that

shalom prevails". On the other hand, Hofmann, (1960: 4004) views "her as a diligent housewife." But to Hawkins, (1995) She is at least a "role model..."

The woman wisdom is seen as an amplification of one of the qualities of the 'High God' Yahweh. The knowledge of God displays a separate, free-standing identity as woman wisdom. God's wisdom essentially represents an aspect of omniscience and the ability to act productively, and this becomes embodied as woman wisdom. "Fear of Yahweh" is said to be the beginning of wisdom (9:10), and yet in reciprocally wisdom enables those who embrace her to understand the "fear of Yahweh" (2:5). (Hawkins, 1995).

Several recent commentators on the book locate chapters 1-9 and 31:10-31 in the Achaemenid era. Toy (1991) argues that "most presume that Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31 were the last units to be added to the book, most likely sometime in the post-exilic period." But the social-historical setting shows a Persian period date mainly for chapter 31:10-31 this is due to the acrostic in the Persian period found in the book in which the "woman of substance" may reflect the socioeconomic realities of Persian-period women. To that end, the sage's description of her is because of epigraphic and biblical evidence for the activities of and perceptions about women in the socio-economic context of Persian-period Palestine.

Woman of Substance in Proverbs 31:10-31 is a composite figure of Persian-period women, particularly women of affluence or position. Since the empire is interconnected, the region experienced rapid growth in international trade due to a widespread network of roads maintained by the Persian government which facilitated communication, travel, and trade within the empire. This is indicated by Persian-period ostraca found at Arad and Beersheba that record the distribution of rations to garrison personnel with non-Hebrew names (Graf, 1994).

5. Historical and Literary Background

The material in the book of Proverbs was probably part of the curriculum for training young men who were preparing to take positions of leadership in the Israelite monarchy. Such positions were not open to young women in that society and culture, which leads to a definite masculine inclination in the book. "My son" is the often-repeated designation for the student. (Lensch, 2003:1). Besides, Crook (1954) sees it as "a memorandum from a school answering to the needs of young women who will shortly be assuming positions of wealth and importance in their

communities.” but there is no evidence that such school ever existed. On the other hand, Whybray (1972) says the passage was written from a man’s viewpoint and hence is “a handbook for prospective bridegrooms.” In short, scholars differ in their opinions, for this reason, a single background cannot be fixed.

Queen’s Mother of Massa is easily given the identity of Bathsheba, the central link between David and Solomon, and in her instruction, she is a staunch speaker on behalf of patriarchal gender ideology, both in the original text in Proverbs 31:1-9 and aggadic treatment of the text (Lensch, 2003). Next, the queen speaks of the role that intoxicants play in very different situations, and here she shows a sensitive appreciation of the fact that context can make all the difference in the world. Those responsible for others, at ease and favoured in their social locations, ought not to be seeking the release that one permits and encourages those in despair. Again, the queen is on solid ground in her warnings: banquets in the world of Israel and its neighbours were occasions where power might be radically redistributed, and not always to the benefit of the ‘afflicted.’ That the mother’s instruction ends with an appeal to stick up for the lowest of the social order is a nice piece of rhetoric from her beginning rhetorical questions, one might have thought her concern was more for how her son’s behaviour reflected upon her, rather than more general regard for the oppressed and their treatment under her son’s rule (Arnold, 2015).

Arnold (2015: 312) claims that the book holds womanhood in the highest regard. The instruction of the mother is on a par with that of the father (1:8; 10:1), and the joy of a good wife is valued above all else (12:4). In this light, it is interesting that the book concludes with the magnificent poem to the excellent woman (31:10–31).

These verses 10- 31 focused on the young man beginning his life of service to God, which can be ruined or made successful by his decision of a life partner (31:23). His choice of a wife is the first test of his character, and his success depends on her character as well. Also, these verses contain Hebrew alphabetical acrostic poem but the poem did not appear to lend itself to simple structural analyses (Defranza, 2011).

6. Exegesis of Proverbs 31:10-31

A woman of (לַיִל *khayil*) who can find? Her worth exceeds precious stones (31:10b). The opening question in Proverbs 31:10a, “who can find?” suggests that the woman of substance is rare. “Her purchase price is more than corals or her worth

exceeds precious stones” suggests that this woman is not only scarce but is expensive to attain because she has a purchase price. It may be argued that she is a typical Persian-period bride (Christine, 2003). In Persian administration and standardization of currency, money increasingly became the preferred medium of exchange and a commodity in everyday transactions throughout the empire. Negotiation in terms of marriage dowry was not difficult. The value of the dowry said much about the perceived value of the woman as a wife. The socioeconomic desirability of a woman, therefore, was proportional to the monetary value of her dowry, the dowry remains her legal property. Because of the quality of this woman, her dowry is very expensive (Christine, 2003).

On the contrary, 31:10 asks the rhetorical question about who can find this “wife of noble character,” whose value is “far above jewels.” Proverbs 3:15 and 8; 11 describe the value of wisdom as also being “more precious than jewels.” Indicating that the woman is not real but it is a personification of wisdom (Hawkins, 1995). But Zuck (1991) points out that since the noble wife “speaks” with wisdom (v. 26), it makes no sense to equate Lady Wisdom with her and thus have “Wisdom speaking with wisdom.” It, therefore, seems better to see the noblewoman in Proverbs 31 as a “wise” woman, not wisdom personified”. In sum, the search for wisdom and as well a noble wife consumes time and effort. It is highly demanding.

Many translators have interpreted the term לַיִל *khayil* to mean “energy, wealth, strength, moral worth, sexual potency but Waltke (2005) interpreted that concept as “all that contributes to making him a strong king .” The rest of the verse warns the king against women that can bring ruin. Proverbs advises the reader not to spend his *khayil* on women who will bring him to ruin but to search for a woman who will bring him *khayil*. On the contrary as argued by Hawkins, (1995) that לַיִל “has a number of shades of meaning... physical strength (Num. 24:18), wealth (Job 20:15, perhaps suggesting wealth attained by one’s strength or ability), and integrity or strength of character (Gen. 47:6; Exod. 18:21, 25).”

Her strength is further described in verse 17 and 19-20. All of which radiate “strength” and “self-assurance” and indicate an almost “aggressive” approach to life (Hawkins, 1995). For Waltke (2006: 525) the “strength” in this verse (17) could be referring to physical strength, spiritual strength.” McCreesh (1985) notes, “She appears to be

completely self-sufficient, rather wealthy, and also spends herself and her resources totally for others.” It implies the hard work of the woman who worked both day and night since she does not depend on anyone for survival. To some extent, the essence of working seriously was for the benefit of others that is her household. Zuck (1991: 237) notes that the Proverbs 31 woman is too busy in her productivity to seek after followers. She sews (vv. 13, 19, 22), cooks (v. 15), gets up before daylight (v. 15), provides food for her family (v. 15), buys fields (v. 16), plants vineyards (vv. 16-17), engages in trading (v. 18), shares goods with the poor (v. 20), clothes her family in the finest of warm clothing (v. 21), makes retail goods and turns a profit (v. 24). She “provides for the various needs of her husband, children, and servants” (vv. 15, 21, 27). Zuck (1991) suggest that verse 30 (1:7 and 9:10) have made clear the fear of the Lord is the foundational essence of wisdom. The noblewoman, then, as one who fears the Lord, is most certainly a wise woman. She represents the epitome of all that Lady Wisdom teaches.” The brain behind strength and success in the fear of Yahweh.

Her husband never lacks for loot / her husband trusts her. He does not lack spoil (v. 11). She brings him good, not evil, all the days of her life (v. 12, 13, 15, 24, 27).

These verses enumerate the types of tasks the senior female in a household would engage in trading raw materials from the household supply and selling the excess once her household is already provided for. This woman is praised not only for her work but for her attitude (delight and wiliness), delicacy food she provided (foreign delicacies), her diligence (rising before dawn), and the wise oversight of her household. According to Davis (2009) the word translated as “gain” is the Hebrew word *salal*” which means “plunder” or “spoils.” As a wife, she blessed her husband physically, financially, and spiritually. Character traits such as trustworthiness (v. 11), industriousness (vv. 11, 13, 15, 17-20, 24, 27), wise speech (v. 26a), and faithful instruction (v. 26b) all rise out of her “fear of Yahweh” (v. 30) and are not related to economic means.

Verse 12 gives more evidence of the wife’s contribution to her husband: “She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.” The good that “she does him” not only includes material benefits, but also moral, and spiritual blessings (Longman, 2006). The woman of virtue adds more to the family assets with the money she earns as a businesswoman. Her industry is the spinning and weaving of textiles, work symbolic of women’s skill throughout the Ancient

Near East. The woman of substance acquires raw materials and flax (v. 13), this verse depicts the wife as a hard worker, working diligently and wisely. Whether she went into the market place to get the wool and flax or collected it from her sheep by putting her hands to the spinning tools (v. 19), and labours at the work or business of her hands. Thompson (1986) notes that “Flax, although less common, was also grown and used by the excellent wife. The flax seeds were used to make oil, which happened to be one of the most readily available oils.” The woman has neither an idle mind nor idle hands she diligent. For her working on distaff indicates that “...the distaff and the spindle were used in the process of spinning and weaving flax or other fibers...” (King, 2001). She made use of rightful tools that could be used for weaving and spinning. Verse 20 stated her relationship with her community. She extended her hands to the poor and the needy. Clement (1989) avers that “In the Hebrew culture, it was common for women to play a large part in their community and impact those around them.” God expects the rich to take care of the poor and the wife’s involvement in the lives of the needy gives evidence to her heart for those around her and her good desire to obey the Lord.

She makes good and quality bed coverings for herself (v. 22), and for the members of her household. She traded textiles, clothing, belts she made in the marketplace. She made a profit and became successful. She invested the good profit she made (v. 16, 18). The parallel phrase, “her lamp is not extinguished at night” (v. 18b), suggests that she worked tirelessly even in the night. This is evident in the Persian period whereby women were workers of the royal economy.

As for the second part of verse 18, “Her lamp does not go out at night,” many scholars suggest that this means that not only did she awaken early in the morning to provide food for her household, but that she also stayed up late into the night (Longman, 2006). Her hard work, diligence, and sacrifice demonstrated her sense of responsibility. In the ancient, if the lamps were lit too late, the house was vulnerable to thieves and other invaders. If the lamps were lit too early, they went out in the middle of the night (Matthews, 1993:26). Her character displays excellence and devotion to her duty.

At that period, women and girls were stockyard workers, treasury workers, goldsmith, and keepers of fruit. They were grain handlers, scribes, irrigation workers, attendants, and rational makers. They were winemakers, beer tenders or preparers, workers in the

armoury, shepherders, stonemasons, and artisans. Also, women who served in the field were paid for their harvesting and as a member of the military garrison.

A good number of women also capitalized on financial opportunities. “She invested in saving the family money” (Sieg, 2014). Economic growth did not favour everyone in the empire. Smallholders with little capital struggled to make enough to pay their rent and taxes, much less to support themselves. Equipment, livestock, and water could be quite expensive (Stolper, 1985). So while some people sought cash advances to build their businesses, others needed to borrow just to survive. Some women took advantage of the rising demand for ready cash and goods. The virtuous woman sought for legitimate cash and goods for her household.

She brings her food from afar (31:14b)

Archaeological evidence shows that during the Persian period, Palestine experienced unprecedented growth in international commerce. There existed importation and exportation of products and goods. Nehemiah in his book describes the marketplace of Persian period Jerusalem as bustling with merchants plying their goods, people treading winepresses, and animals loaded with heaps of grain, grapes, and fig seven on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:15-16; cf. Neh. 10:31). And at Elephantine, women bought, sold, and bartered in the markets for goods such as salt, vegetables, barley, cucumber seed, grain, and oil. The use of a merchant ship in this chapter indicates international transactions. She is privileged to order for her household food.

She gives rations to her young women (31:15c)

The woman of substance is a mistress who has a staff of young women/girls (v. 15c). The term ‘*nirot*’ [נִירוֹת] in Hebrew may refer to female freeborn servants or slaves whose primary assignment is domestic labour. In the Hebrew Bible, women with ‘*nirot*’: are typically from well-to-do families or royalty, as an affluent woman, she has three to five slaves that could be male or female. During the Persian- period, such woman receives those slaves as part of her dowries and might purchase or by inheritance or as supplemental dowry gifts to ease her transition into the marital home were predominantly female, possibly young handmaids or the bride’s nursemaid.

On the other hand, they could be contingent female workers. Like in the field of Boaz in Ruth 2:8. This

woman might have female workers who work weavers or assist in her textile industry. This practice is not foreign during that period. Affluent and royal women often employed workers on their estates. As an employer, she provided rations for her worker and gave the allotted portion to her workers (Levine, 1998).

She considers a field and acquires it (31:16)

She thus converts real estate she purchased into an income-generating property. Persian-period royal women and women of high rank were property holders and estate owners. Another way a woman might acquire property is by dowry or bequest.

The acquisition and improvement of property by the woman of substance in this verse are yet further means by which she, like some Persian-period women, might provide for the well-being of those in her household. Indeed, her land would afford some financial security, which purportedly others in Persian-period Palestine did not have. It is a sign of her good stewardship.

Verse 21 records the making of covering for her household. The fact that her household was clothed in scarlet demonstrated her wealth. According to Kidner (1964) discusses that scarlet was an expensive cloth. The Hebrew wording indicated that the scarlet may have been doubled to aid in warmth. This significantly increased the worth of the fabric. The use of such cloth is an indication that God has blessed her hard work.

The reward of praise verses 29-30

The components of her reward contain: Her husband is recognized at the gates, her children blessed her, her husband praised her, she surpasses many daughters that render *khayil*, as a woman who fears the Lord she should be praised, let her be rewarded with praise at the city gate. The praise rendered in verse 29 connotes military term but in this context in means great riches or gain. The term ‘surpass’ literally means “go up over/ against” in the military context it is “going out to do battle against the enemy.” But Perdue (2000) and Davis (2000) argue that *khayil* carries the meaning of a moral character.

The term “surpass” is only ascribed to her in verse (29).

Thus, the *’eshethkhayil* renders *khayil* and is therefore praised in this poem which calls to join in her continued praise. “The word they used for “excellently” *Khayil* was the same word used at the beginning of the poem meaning “noble,” “valiant,” or “excellent” (Miller, 2004). She

was the epitome of what was valued in the Hebrew culture.

The phrase “fears the Lord” in verse 30 is the most important praise of this woman. Some scholars have seen verse 30 as a religious addition to an otherwise secular poem, but Whybray (1994) argues that this reference to religion may well be the climax of the poem; it is a longer verse than others and concludes the catalogue of the wife’s virtues summing them up in the expression ‘fear of Yahweh’. From the personified wisdom, the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom (9:10) and wisdom enables those who accept her to understand the fear of Yahweh (2: 5).

7. The Role of Virtue in Ecclesiastical Dignity

Virtues are those character traits that are essential to living a fulfilling human life, a life in which one both cares about the right things and has the wisdom and skill to act intelligently about those things (Russell, 2013:4). Character is significant in human life.

Virtue produces ecclesiastical dignity. It is needed in all aspects of church governance. The leaders of the church must possess good virtues in term of human and non -human management. Hawkins (1995) submits “the woman of virtue models an industrious and productive lifestyle that contributes to the prosperity of the home and of society at large.” She was not given recognition because of riches but on industrious productivity that was based on the diligent application of the principles of wisdom based on the fear of Yahweh.

Human management is the ability to handle the situation of both the young and old, rich and poor, elite and novice without discrimination. The one in charge of such management must be upright and morally sound. The woman wisdom acted correctly and was able to manage her household.

The life style of the leader is another concern. Virtue will make the leader to shun any form of corruption and immorality and whatever will tarnish his or her image. The character of the leader is unwritten curriculum that easily influences the followers. An adulterous pastor will continue to breed immoral members, likewise a liar will produce deceivers.

Non- human management focuses on money and property. Virtue helps the leader to handle money truthfully, dignity consciousness is always ringing in the mind of such a leader. In the aspect of church

property, the leaders are careful in the way they handle it.

Virtue enables rightful living and intellectual disposition of every duty and plan. It is a vital tool that produces rightful dealing and correct disposition. It shuns godlessness, laziness, lie and any form of wrong doing as stated in Gal. 5: 19-21. For the church to attain dignity, virtue is needful and must be practised by every adherent of Christian faith (Hawkins, 1995).

Hard work is essential in the ecclesiastical circle. Many leaders are not diligent like the virtuous woman but they allow them to occupy the position because of gender bias and their affluence. Such practice causes damage to ecclesiastical dignity. Women who are diligent, industrious, prudent, disciplined, hardworking and God fearing like the woman in the text should be considered for such leadership position rather than an indolent male.

8. Conclusion

Virtue dignified and exalted woman wisdom or the personified wisdom in Proverbs 31:10-31. The ideal woman disposition of good virtues resulted in economic stability in her family, good moral was promoted among her slaves, children and husband, and spiritual dignity was awarded to her as well (v.29). The same could be replicated in the church if such women who abound in the church in Nigeria today are given opportunities to serve as leaders in the church. Women who are conscious of rightful behaviour should be considered for church leadership. Failure to incorporate women of substance into church leadership is depriving the church a lot of opportunities for development.

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