

The Authorship of the Book of Proverbs

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a review of the literature in an effort to determine who is, or, are the author(s) of the book of Proverbs. Was Solomon the only author of the book of Proverbs, or can its contents be attributed to others also? But why is this question important? This student has been socialized to believing that Solomon was the sole author of this book, but there seems to be internal evidence that others had a hand in its authorship. The authorship of the book of Proverbs, and indeed the rest of the wisdom literature, is important because if it can be demonstrated that some non-Jewish source or sources contributed to this book, then it raises the question as to the intended purpose of Proverbs. Authorship may demonstrate whether or not this book was intended as a theological book concerned solely with the people of Israel, or a book of practical living that is applicable to all peoples of all times, including peoples in contemporary societies throughout the world. It is the thesis of this paper that although there is no consensus as to the authorship of the book of Proverbs, and although King Solomon is the largest contributor, that the book has multiple authors.

A Literature Review

LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush posit that those sages responsible for wisdom literature were not bound by limitations of culture or nationality; the character of wisdom is its international character. They observe that: "Proverbs of one society are freely borrowed by another, because their very character as observation based on study or reflection upon life gives them a universality not always found in epic or historical writings." That the wisdom literature including Proverbs was not exclusively concerned with Israel's national life and theology may be observed in the fact that according to LaSor, et al, "the great themes of Israel's faith – election from Egypt, the covenant with Yahweh, public worship, the day of the Lord – play little part in wisdom writings."

Fox goes further to state that the book is purely a secular work, and makes no claim to divine revelation or inspiration. He observes that in the book Yahweh is never quoted or addressed. Fox states: "In fact, it never had a role in the ritual life of Israel, in neither temple nor synagogue. . . . With the exception of a few passages, it treats everyday life, not the grand affairs of state, history, cult, or law." One may disagree with Fox as to whether or not the book of Proverbs makes claims of divine revelation or inspiration, but his point is worthy of note. If the book is not primarily or exclusively concerned with the ritual life of Israel, then a multicultural or international authorship can be easily envisioned. There seems to be three prevailing views of the authorship of the book of Proverbs; sole Solomonic authorship, non-Solomonic authorship, and shared authorship.

Sole Solomonic Authorship

There is not a consensus opinion as to who is the author of the book of Proverbs. On the basis of Proverbs 10:1 and 25:1 many have attributed the authorship of Proverbs to Solomon, King David's son. Ruffle sees no problem with the book being the product of Solomon, certainly, if not as the person who actually composed all the words, at least the one who either by

himself, or through surrogates, compiled the collection as we now have it. He argues that maybe the problem faced when determining the authorship of Proverbs is the use of the word ‘author.’ He thought it likely that the maxims found in this book are the work of a ‘compiler’ than an ‘author. He further states however: “To this extent one can talk of an author and I really do not see why this work could not be undertaken if not by Solomon at least by a scribe working directly under his supervision.” Ruffle believes that the counsellors and scribes in the courts of David and his son Solomon were of the caliber that could accomplish such a task. Johnson accepts the view that Solomon is the author of Proverbs. He argues that just like the authorship of the Psalms is assigned to David, the book of Proverbs likewise is assigned to Solomon as set forth in the opening verse of the book. Likewise, Johnson holds the sole-Solomonic view. He writes: “The title reveals that the book is set apart as royal literature, written in the context of the court, to be enjoyed by its patrons and practiced by those close to the king.”

Non-Solomonic Authorship

Harris observes that because Solomon’s name occurs in three parts of the book (1:1; 10:1; and 25:1, Solomonic authorship is assumed for most of the book except Parts III, 22:17 — 24:22; IV, 24:23-34; and VI, 30:1 — 31:31. Harris notes that critical scholars have disputed this claim. For example Harris cites Crawford H. Toy, who in his book, *The Book of Proverbs* not only denies the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and denies that Isaiah and the prophets wrote the books that bear their names, he also denies Solomonic authorship of the book of Proverbs, in part or in whole. Instead, he assigns the book a post-Exilic date. Dating the book of Proverbs in the postexilic period would eliminate Solomon as one of, or its sole author. No one in the postexilic period was identified as being the author of the book.

Shared Authorship: Solomon Plus Others

The belief that Solomon was the sole author has been challenged by many scholars, as is the belief that he had no hand in its composition in any form. Saebø argues that while the superscription of chapter 10:1 indicates “Proverbs of Solomon,” internal evidence in the book of Proverbs points to additional authors. For example in 24:23 we have: “These also are sayings of the wise.” Saebø observes: “By its “also” the superscription may refer to 22:17 where a similar phrase: “Words of wise men may indicate another superscription.” Parsons rejects that Solomon was the sole author of Proverbs. Instead, he sees Solomon as the “inspired editor or collector of wise sayings from other cultures.”

Kitchen states that the book of Proverbs in its present form is broken into three distinct divisions. The largest section, called the Proverbs of Solomon, spans chapters 1-24. A second section, the Proverbs of Solomon copied by Hezekiah's men, occupies chapters 25-29). The third section, chapters 30 and 31, contains the Words of Agur (chapter 30), and Words to Lemuel, with or without the Good Wife, (chapter. 31). Kitchen observes that it is most likely that in the 10th century Solomon composed wisdom material that was recopied by Hezekiah's scribes some 250 years later. He then offers that at some unknown date the Words of Agur and to Lemuel were composed and added to the collection. These were added at a future time to the previous two Solomonic collections. Solomon evidently left behind additional material that was most likely transmitted orally, or perhaps in some unedited scripted form which Hezekiah’s scribes then collated and edited in a more formal manuscript form that gives us the product we now have in the English Bible.

Branson concludes that it is quite probable that Solomon was directly responsible for some of the material (10:1). But he intimates that even those sections that are generally thought to be Solomon's, does not necessarily mean that he is the originator of those sections. He states: "Yet it is the nature of a proverb to be passed down orally for many generations, and Solomon may have been a collector as well as an originator of them."

Waltke observes that authorship of Proverbs cannot be unequivocally stated because chapter divisions in English Bibles, and the book of Proverbs being no exception, are not reliable gages of author's groupings, "for the chapters were demarcated before form and rhetorical criticism had become a science." As near as he could surmise, Waltke sees the book of Proverbs as having seven sections, marked by editorial notices (at 1:1; 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; and 31:1) as follows:

- "Collection I: Introduction to the Book (chaps. 1-9)
- Collection II: Proverbs of King Solomon (10:1-22:16)
- Collection III: Thirty Sayings of the Wise Adapted by Solomon (22:17-24:22)
- Collection IV: Further Sayings of the Wise (24:23-34)
- Collection V: Further Proverbs by Solomon, Collected by Hezekiah's Men (chaps. 25-29)
- Collection VI: Sayings of Agur, son of Jakeh (chap. 30)
- Collection VII: Sayings of King Lemuel (chap. 31)."

Lenzi also argues for multiple authorship of the book of Proverbs. For example, he indicates that there is consensus that chapter 1-9 are composite material. He identifies ten lectures or series of instructions. In these chapters he argues that the most important are the poems about personified wisdom (chapters 1, 8, and 9). He then argues: "Because these poems do not show signs of coming from one author. . . . they are a series of reflections from several authors inserted into what is now chs. 1-9, probably at various times." So not only cannot the entire book be attributed to one author, even this section (chapters 1-9) he sees as having multiple authors. He further argues that the "Wisdom poems" found in this section: "can be explained not from having a single author but from a process of organic growth, with each successive author reading the earlier text and elaborating on it."

Steinmann is among those voices that argue for multiple authorship of the book of Proverbs. He observes notice of authorship at 1:1, 10:1, 22:17, 24:23, 25:1, 30:1, and 31:1. He states that in addition to multiple authors, that most scholars regard the acrostic poem found at the end of the book (31:10-31) as a separate composition by an unknown author. He concurs with Waltke on the authorship of the first seven sections, but adds an eighth section whose author is not attributed. Steinmann's division and labeling of the sections that follows:

1. 1:1 – 9:18 – Solomon
2. 10:1 – 22:16 – Solomon
3. 22:17 – 24:22 – Wise Men
4. 24:23-34 – Wise Men
5. 25:1 – 29:26 – Solomon (has co-opted by Hezekiah's men)
6. 30:1-33 – Agur, son of Jakeh
7. 31:1-9 – Lemuel (or his mother)
8. 31:10-31 – unknown

Fox too argues for multiple authorship of the book of Proverbs. He argues that the various collection headers seem to indicate that the book as we have it is a "collection of wisdom

of ancient Israel. Fox offers as evidence for multiple authorship of this book, the presence of Agur (30:1) and Lemuel's mother (31:1). Fox states that it is held by some that the older collections of this book, chapters 10 to 29 contain primarily oral folk sayings of people engaged in agrarian life, and people in the lower rung of society in pre-exilic times. He further observes that: "Prov 1 – 9 and numerous additions to the older collections are from the post exilic schools." Clearly then, according to Fox's evidence presented, Solomon could not be the sole author, and in fact, the book of Proverbs is a compilation of works (oral tradition and from the schools) over a relatively long period of time.

Like Steinmann, Waltke and others, Yoder believes that Agur is the author of chapter 30. Yoder makes a clear distinction between Agur, Solomon and the Hezekiah's officials who copied the sayings of Solomon. He notes that Agur is a stranger, and does not have a typical Hebrew name. Furthermore, the name Agur and that of his father Jakeh are not found elsewhere in the Old Testament. Yoder posits that Agur is from Massa, an ethnic tribe from north Arabian territory who are descended from Ishmael's son, Massa. He writes: "Agur is thus a non-Israelite, although he is evidently well versed in Israelite wisdom." Yoder also argues that Agur's speech departs from the genre used in Proverbs. He puts Agur's speech in the oracle category more typically found in the prophets. "

Chapter 31 opens with "The words of Lemuel king of Massa, which his mother taught him." Like Agur, Lemuel hails from Massa. Crenshaw states that this region of Massa was in Transjordan, that is, North Arabia. Here too is further evidence that the book of Proverbs has more than one contributor, and at least in the case of Agur and Lemuel, the evidence suggests that they are foreigners.

Discussion

The book of Proverbs is part of the canon of Scripture, and rightfully so because it is the inspired word of God. It has been here argued that there is an international flavor to this book. It concerns itself not exclusively with Israel's national life, cultic practices, government, history, or the special covenant relationship that God maintains with his people Israel, but instead it has a universal appeal, well beyond the national boundaries of Israel. The book of Proverbs is a book that has universal application for peoples the world over. The wisdom contained in this book finds significance and applicability not just to the people of authors' times, but for our own times.

The literature review has demonstrated that there are at least three views regarding the authorship of the book of Proverbs; sole Solomonic authorship, non-Solomonic authorship, and the shared authorship perspective. The sole Solomonic authorship can be rejected on the grounds that the book itself contains superscriptions other than Solomon's. For example, at 22:17 we observe, "Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, And apply your mind to my knowledge;" and again at 24:23 we have, "These also are sayings of the wise." These seem to be a clear break point from the rest of the narrative thus far. The Solomonic sections seem clearly demarcated. In 1:1 the book starts out: "The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel;" and at 10:1 "The proverbs of Solomon." The use of the third person personal pronoun, the words of "the wise" or the sayings of "the wise," seems a clear enough departure from the identification of "the Proverbs of Solomon." It seems reasonable that if the sections starting at 22:17 and 24:23 were the work of Solomon, that Proverbs would have so stated. And while it could be argued that the author simply referred to himself in the third person, that seems inconsistent with the rest of the book in so far as the individual sections are

identified by persons' names. Although these wise men are not identified by name, it seems reasonable to assume that they are not Solomon.

The non- Solomonic view can also be rejected because clearly the book identifies Solomon as one of the authors. Solomon was a historical figure, King of Israel, the son of David, and if the book identifies him as an author, I find no compelling reason to doubt that superscriptions. It could be conceded that he is not the sole author of this book. It could also be conceded that Solomon or his scribes may have been compilers of the contents of Proverbs, but to completely deny his authorship is not supported by the evidence. It seems perfectly consistent with the "wise man" Solomon to have written or contributed to the writing of a book of wisdom. Indeed, when Solomon was made King, and God asked him to make a request, he requested wisdom and knowledge which God granted to him (2 Chr1:9-13). It seems altogether consistent that the King of Israel, who was arguably the wisest of Kings in his day would have been motivated to write some of these proverbs.

The shared authorship perspective seems supported by the internal evidence in Proverbs. Section 1 starting at 1:1 – 9:18, and section 2 starting at 10:1 – 22:16 are clearly identified as the work of Solomon. Sections 3 and 4, starting at 22:17 – 24:22, and 24:23-34 respectively are identified as the sayings of the wise men. Section 5 is superscripted with "These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transcribed" (25:1). Clearly the transcribers must have had available to them either the oral sayings of Solomon, or otherwise in some scripted form that they perhaps compiled and edited and added to that which had been passed down in a more formal manuscript. Chapter 30, section 6 is identified as the words of Agur the son of Jakeh, not Solomon. Chapter 31, in part or in whole is attributed to Lemuel or his mother, according to Steinmann.

So the book is explicit about the authorship of sections 1, 2 and 5 as that of Solomon; sections 6 and 7 as that of Agur and Lemuel respectively. It is vague about sections 3 and 4, and only identifies those sections as being the words, or sayings of wise men. Wilson argues that the "vague superscript in 24:23 (*gam 'elleh lahä-kämtm*, "these also belong to the wise[men]") implies by reverse logic that the remaining authors are likewise "wisemen)." Wilson seems to be arguing that these authors of these sections are other than those identified by name in this book. But even if those wise men were assumed to be King Solomon, this would only mean that instead of having a minimum of five authors of the book (Solomon, the wise men [more than one], Agur, and Lemuel), we would have three (Solomon, Agur, and Lemuel). Whether three, or more than five, it is clear from the evidence that there are multiple authors for this book, among which number is Solomon, King of Israel, the son of David.

Conclusion

This was an interesting and enlightening research. Understanding the multinational and multicultural authorship of the book of Proverbs provides a better appreciation for its appeal to a wider audience. Solomon and the other authors of this book made cogent observations of life and took the time to transmit them to us. God graciously and providentially preserved them, and wise men, under the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit included them in the canon of Scripture. The body of Christ has benefited from these jewels of wisdom contained in these 31 chapters.

But as helpful as it was to learn that there are multiple authors of the book of Proverbs, some of whom were foreigners, and as profoundly impactful as it was to know that the concerns of the world were in view, this book would have still been inspiring and motivating had it come from Solomon alone, a Jewish King. His moral teaching is remarkable. I believe many leaders

who have falling into sexual sins may have learned a lot from Solomon on such matters. Indeed he was in a position to know. For example: “For on account of a harlot one is reduced to a loaf of bread, And an adulteress hunts for the precious life. 27 Can a man take fire in his bosom And his clothes not be burned? 28 Or can a man walk on hot coals And his feet not be scorched?” (Pro 6:26-28). The multiple authorship of the book of Proverbs having been established, this student will approach the reading of it with a more critical eye. In reading it again observation will be made as to whether or not the Solomonic sections differ in style from the other sections. Whereas I had held that the sections designated the words or sayings of wise men were really the words of Solomon the wise King, I would now compare them with the Solomonic sections to determine if they are some discernible differences in style or emphasis.

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