

The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Proverbs

F.F. Bruce

[p.76]

The Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible is entitled *Mishlé Shelomoh*—‘the Proverbs of Solomon’—from the words with which it opens. The wisdom of Solomon was itself proverbial, and his gift for proverbial utterance is recorded in 1 Kings 4:32 ff: “And he spake three thousand proverbs... and he spake of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: He spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes.”

The word translated ‘proverb’ is Heb. *mashal*, which has a wider sense than that which we usually associate with ‘proverb’. Its root meaning is ‘to resemble’, and so it might be rendered ‘similitude’ or ‘parable’. And this is the character of many of the proverbs in this book, the point of which consists in a comparison between two situations, e.g. “As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to them that send him” (Prov. 10:26). The word *mashal* is as applicable to the parables of a greater than Solomon as to the proverbs of Solomon himself.

The Book of Proverbs contains seven smaller collections. These are:

(i) chapters I to 9, a number of passages in praise of wisdom, entitled “The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel”. Indeed, the whole paragraph, 1:1-6, forms the title both to this smaller collection and to the complete book.

(ii) chapters 10:1-22:16, another collection of shorter and more isolated saws, entitled “The proverbs of Solomon”.

(iii) chapters 22:17-24:22, entitled (in the Septuagint) “The words of the wise”.^{*} This is followed by a short section, 24:23-34,

[p.77]

which bears the title, “These also are sayings of the wise”, and forms an appendix to it.

(iv) chapters 25 to 29, a collection similar in character to No. ii, and entitled “These also are proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out.” Presumably they had circulated orally before Hezekiah’s time. Hezekiah’s reign appears to have been a period of considerable literary activity in the southern kingdom, in spite of the Assyrian menace.

^{*} This is the section which shows closest contact with the Wisdom of Amenemope, mentioned in our previous paper. In its original form it seems to have contained 38 small sections, and the difficult verse 22:20 is now generally held to mean “Have I not written for thee thirty sayings?” The Wisdom of Amenemope contains the passage: “Consider these thirty chapters”. Put, whatever the literary relationship, the Hebrew writer preserves an independent outlook.

(v) chapter 30, entitled (as we should probably translate) "The words of Agur the son of Jakeh of Massa". Massa was a region in North Arabia, referred to in Gen. 25:14 and 1 Chron. 1:30, and mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions; the name may survive in the modern Masani, north-east of Dumah. Agur may have been one of the "children of the east" mentioned in I Kings 4:30. A number, of the sayings of Agur are cast in a readily recognizable fourfold pattern; cf. verses 11-14, 15b-16, 18-19, 21-23, 24-28, 29-31.

(vi) chapter 31:1-9, entitled "The words of Lemuel king of Massa, which his mother taught him" (so R. V. margin, as in 30:1), and therefore probably emanating from the same quarter, as the preceding collection. The maternal advice in this brief section urges that a king, to perform his duty properly, must avoid the temptations of wine and women.

(vii) chapter. 31:10-31, an acrostic poem celebrating the praises of the virtuous woman, or 'woman of worth'. Each of the 22 verses of this section begins with the corresponding letter, of the Hebrew alphabet. The Hebrew text gives no clue to the authorship of this poem.

The Septuagint exhibits a different order here and there, but the order of the Hebrew text is preferable. Thus, the Septuagint places Collection iv between Collections vi and vii, and thus makes it appear that Solomon himself was the author of the acrostic in praise of the 'woman of worth'—which, in view of his unhappy matrimonial career, is hardly likely. An equally unconvincing change of order in the Septuagint is the placing of the appendix entitled "These also are sayings of the wise" (24:23-34) between verses 14 and 15 of chapter 30.

(To be continued)

© 1951 F.F. Bruce. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in March 2008 by Robert I Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
