

Northern Caribbean University  
School of Religion and Theology

AUTHORSHIP AND DATE  
OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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RELB 306 Survey of the Old Testament

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## INTRODUCTION

It is evident from studies of Proverbs that the book has a number of authors and was compiled over an extended period of time. Bible scholars differ in their opinions concerning the authorship and date of compilation of the book. There are a number of critics who believe that references to the names of some authors of Proverbs are symbolic. There are others who believe that the final compilation date of the book was around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that the names of the authors in question are literal and denote actual persons who really existed. There are also some who refute the 2<sup>nd</sup> century date of final compilation and instead advocate a final compilation date of around the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Evidence would favour literal names for the authors in question and an earlier final compilation date of around 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C as opposed to symbolic names and final compilation date of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

It is the purpose of this paper to present evidence to support literal names and final compilation date in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

## TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

### **History of Interpretation**

According to some critics, nothing in Proverbs dates from a period earlier than 350 B.C. Some also say that the later material was contributed in the second century.<sup>1</sup> Scholars, such as Crenshaw, Murphy and Purdue, hold to the belief that much of Proverbs was brought together from a time well after Solomon.<sup>2</sup>

There are critics who suggest that the names of some authors are symbolic. It is proposed that the usage of the term lemuel can be symbolic, meaning "to God" or, in a sense, "Godward," describing someone given to a God. As a child, Solomon had been dedicated to God and was named Jedidiah, which means "loved by the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:25). Lemuel could very well be a reference to Solomon.<sup>3</sup>

Some have suggested that Agur may be symbolic for "gatherer." If this is so, it can refer to someone who gathered proverbs, possibly,

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<sup>1</sup>Gleason L. Archer, **A Survey of Old Testament Introduction** (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 517.

<sup>2</sup>Clarence Benson, **Old Testament Survey: Poetry and Prophecy** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 124.

<sup>3</sup>W.J. Deane, and S.T. Taylor-Taswell, **The Pulpit Commentary: Proverbs** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), 16.

Solomon himself.<sup>4</sup>

Others suggest that the term "The Wise" is also a symbolic reference to Solomon himself, who was considered to be the wisest man. According to 1 Kings 4:30-32 (KJV): "And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men..."<sup>5</sup>

### **Textual Analysis**

#### Date of Composition

In order to assign a date to the composition and final form of the book, it is best to assume that Solomon was the author of most of the material, and that, therefore, the book of Proverbs had its beginning during the time he reigned from 971-931.<sup>6</sup> Since not all of Solomon's materials were collected during his lifetime, the proverbs that remained were gathered together and added to the book about 700 B.C., in the days of Hezekiah.

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<sup>4</sup>James L. Crenshaw, "Book of Proverbs," **The Anchor Bible Dictionary** (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 19.

<sup>5</sup>Jensen, Irving L. **Proverbs: A Self-Study Guide**. Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 7.

<sup>6</sup>Leo G. Perdue, **Proverbs Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching** (New York: Blackwell Publications, 2000), 54.

Therefore the book was probably in formation for more than three hundred years, from the days of Solomon to Hezekiah. Finally by the end of Hezekiah's reign it assumed its final form of compilation.<sup>7</sup> It is clear from Prov. 25:1 that the book could not have been completed before Hezekiah's time.<sup>8</sup>

### Agur

The sayings of Agur the son of Jakeh are of uncertain origin, inasmuch as we have no information whatever as to Jakeh's historical, geographical, or even ethnic background. The reference to authorship in chapter 30 is the statement "The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh-an oracle" (30:1). The word Agur could be a reference to a proper name, but neither Agur nor Jakeh occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament, and we are at a loss to further identify this person.<sup>9</sup>

The information suggests that Agur was the son of Jakeh, making it difficult to understand Agur as symbolic. We can only say that the person is not identified, but that his material is included in the

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<sup>7</sup>Louis Goldberg, **Savoring the Wisdom of Proverbs** (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 22.

<sup>8</sup>W.S. Lasor, D.A. Hubbard, and F.W. Bush, **Old Testament Survey** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 470.

<sup>9</sup>Goldberg, 23.

Word of God.<sup>10</sup>

### Lemuel

If the suggestion of some critics is accepted, and Lemuel is symbolic of Solomon, then Solomon's mother (Bathsheba) would have been responsible for chapter 31. It is best to say that we are not sure of the identification of Lemuel.<sup>11</sup>

The sayings of King Lemuel are certainly of non-Israelite origin, but it is reasonable to suppose that he cherished a faith in the one true God. So far as Prov. 31:10-31 is concerned, it is ambiguous whether this beautiful description of the perfect wife is attributed to King Lemuel or to some other.<sup>12</sup> The fact that it is composed as a poem shows that it is a separate composition and it has little resemblance to the first 9 verses of Chapter 31.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>11</sup>Goldberg, 27.

<sup>12</sup>Murphy, Roland E., **Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther** (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1975), 43.

<sup>13</sup>St. John Bosco. **The Catholic Encyclopedia** (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), 137.

## The Wise

Reference to "The Wise" as author is in 24:23 "These also are sayings of the wise." This suggests someone different from Solomon. We read of the "elders who had served Solomon (I kings 12:6), and the term elder may mean "wise man." It is possible that these men could have added material of their own to the proverbs of Solomon. In fact, Agur could have been one of these very elders.<sup>14</sup> Two sections (chaps. 22-24) are attributed to the "wise men", who probably belonged to the same class referred to in I Kings 4:31.<sup>15</sup> It is likely that they preceded Solomon.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Louis Goldberg, **Savoring the Wisdom of Proverbs** (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 56.

<sup>15</sup>S.H. Blank, "Book of Proverbs," **The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible** (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 134.

<sup>16</sup>Milo Chapman, Earl Wolf and A. Harper, **Beacon Bible Commentary: Proverbs** (London: Inter Varsity Press, 1978), 67.



## CONCLUSION

After reviewing evidence presented by critics it seems quite possible that the names of some authors could have been symbolic names with different connotations. The arguments supporting the late final compilation date of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century also seem probable.

However is evident that even though many critics hold these authorship and date views of Proverbs, the arguments presented for literal names of the authors in question and earlier final compilation date of the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. are more credible.

The names of Lemuel, Agur, and "The Wise" appear to be literal names that denote specific individuals responsible in part for the authorship of the book. Arguments presented indicate that the book was probably in formation for more than three hundred years beginning in the days of Solomon to the time of king Hezekiah. It is believed that by the end of Hezekiah's reign the book was completed.

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