

Faith Pulpit

The Authorship of Proverbs 30

Problematic, difficult, and puzzling are three words sometimes used to describe Proverbs chapter 30. In fact, the problems of the first verse are so great that some Bible commentators say they are unsolvable. McKane (644) highlights the difficulties when he says, “In such a verse, where there is hardly a glimmer of light, one feels powerless to make even the first move towards its elucidation.” Let us wrestle with this verse and seek to find some answers.

One of the main problems which demands our attention is the problem of authorship. Who wrote the proverbs of this chapter? Was it Agur the man’s name, or is it a word that speaks of what he did? Was Agur Solomon? Does the chapter tell us anything about his family and nationality?

The reason one feels so powerless to decipher this verse is that there is not even any agreement on how this verse should be translated into English. Arnot (p. 561) speaks of this problem when he says, “The chief difficulty lies in the first verse, and refers to the four terms which the translators have taken as the name of four persons. It is still uncertain whether these should be read as proper names, or as ordinary Hebrew words, expressing a specific meaning.”

There are two main views concerning the authorship of Proverbs 30. Some Bible teachers hold that it was written by Solomon. Others hold that it was written by Agur. (It is not a question of inspiration. Those on both sides hold to the inspiration of the chapter. The same is true with the book of Hebrews whether it was written by Paul or Luke or someone else.)

The first view is that Solomon was the author. Let us examine the evidence for this view. To begin with, there is support from Proverbs 1:1 which says, “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel.” On the basis of this verse, some hold that Solomon is the author of all the proverbs of the book of Proverbs. If this verse is taken as a statement of fact covering every proverb in the book, it may support such a view.

However, those who disagree with total Solomonic authorship argue that 1:1 is not a statement of fact, but rather a title for the book, or a title for only the first section of the book. Against the argument that 1:1 is a statement of fact describing the content of all the book of Proverbs it should be noted that Proverbs 10:1 also says, “the proverbs of Solomon.” On the one hand this shows that this section would certainly be Solomon’s work, but on the other hand such a title would be unnecessary if 1:1 covered the whole book.

Second, there is support from Proverbs 25:1 which says “these are also proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out.” Thus that section is definitely also the work of Solomon. Hezekiah’s men were simply compilers. They collected proverbs from the writings of Solomon which were not yet put into the book of Proverbs, and, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, put them there.

Third, there is support from Proverbs 22:17 and 24:23. Proverbs 22:17 says, “hear the words of the wise.” 24:23 tells us that those proverbs are also the sayings of the wise. Those who hold total Solomonic authorship would say that Solomon was the wisest man of all (and he was) and that these two sections are also the work of Solomon. However, “the wise” is a group of men, and it seems unnatural to read Solomon in place of the group.

The fourth support (which is also a problem in itself) is Proverbs 31:1 which says, “The words of King Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him.” Since there was no king in Israel named Lemuel, and since Lemuel means “devoted to God,” some (including this author) hold that this is a reference to Solomon. Lemuel was very close to his mother (31:1), and Solomon was close to Bathsheba.

The fifth support (and the major problem) is Proverbs 30:1 which says, “The words of Agur, the son of Jakeh.” *Agur* means “collector” and *Jakeh* means “pious.” Thus this phrase might be translated “The words of a collector, the son of the pious.” Those who argue for Solomonic authorship would say that this is not a personal name, but rather a title of a man who collected and compiled still more of Solomon’s proverbs (in addition to those collected by the men of Hezekiah).

Thus, it is possible that Solomon wrote all of the proverbs found in the book of Proverbs. However, there are also difficulties with such a view, and we need to look at the other side of the issue.

The support of holding that Agur was the author of this chapter first of all comes from the name “Agur.” The fact that *Agur* means “collector” does not rule out its being a proper name as well. *Malachi* means “my messenger,” but it is a proper name of the author of the last book of our Old Testament.

The Masoretic scribes understood Agur to be a proper noun. The translators of the King James Version also did. So do many Bible commentators. Kidner (p. 178) states, there is no need to find here . . . a *nom de plume* for Solomon, requiring far-fetched interpretation.”

The second support comes from the style. The style of Proverbs 30 differs from the style of Solomon's writings. Numerical proverbs are prominent in the proverbs of this chapter, but they are not in the proverbs of Solomon.

The third support comes from the name of the father of Agur. Proverbs 30:1 tells us that Agur was "the son of Jakeh." Taking the word *Agur* to be a descriptive phrase instead of a name opens the door to all kinds of speculation. Commentators have translated this as "the pious one," "the obedient one," "the vomiter" (Crawford Toy page 518), and even "the princess of Massa" (Zockler as cited by Toy on page 518). It seems best to stay with the proper noun and take Jakeh to be the name of Agur's father. The writer of Proverbs 30 would thus have been known as Agur Ben-Jakeh.

Where did Agur live? We do not know. Some take the word *hamasa*, rendered in the Authorized Version as "the prophecy," slightly change it, and take it to be a reference to a town in northern Arabia (cf. Gen. 25:14, I Chron. 1:30). As such it is claimed that Agur was an Ishmaelite. However, the Authorized Version translation is a legitimate rendering, it makes sense in the context of Proverbs 30, and it should be left as it stands.

In considering the evidence for Solomonic or Aguric authorship, it seems best to take Agur as the writer of Proverbs 30.

Who was Agur? The author of this article holds that he was a wise Israelite, the son of Jakeh, who was used by God to give us the proverbs of Proverbs 30.

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