

Adam Clarke:

Introduction to the Proverbs of Solomon
The Son of David, King of Israel

There has scarcely been any dispute concerning either the author or Divine authority of this book, either in the Jewish or Christian Church: all allow that it was written by Solomon; and the general belief is, that he wrote the book by Divine inspiration.

It has, indeed, been supposed that Solomon collected the major part of these proverbs from those who had preceded him, whether Hebrews or heathens; but the latter opinion has been controverted, as derogating from the authority of the book. But this supposition has very little weight; for, whatever of truth is found in or among men, came originally from God; and if he employed an inspired man to collect those rays of light, and embody them for the use of his Church, he had a right so to do, and to claim his own wheresoever found, and, by giving it a new authentication, to render it more useful in reference to the end for which it was originally communicated. God is the Father of lights, and from him came all true wisdom, not only in its discursive teachings but in all its detached maxims for the government and regulation of life. I think it very likely that Solomon did not compose them all; but he collected every thing of this kind within his reach, and what was according to the Spirit of truth, by which he was inspired, he condensed in this book; and as the Divine Spirit gave it, so the providence of God has preserved it, for the use of his Church.

That true Light, which lightens every man that cometh into the world, first taught men to acknowledge himself as the Fountain and Giver of all good; and then by short maxims, conveyed in terse, energetic words, taught them to regulate their conduct in life, in respect to the dispensations of his providence, and in reference to each other in domestic, social, and civil life; and this was done by such proverbs as we find collected in this book. The different changes that take place in society; the new relations which in process of time men would bear to each other; the invention of arts and sciences; and the experience of those who had particularly considered the ways of the Lord, and marked the operations of his hands; would give rise to many maxims, differing from the original stock only in their application to those new relations and varying circumstances.

The heathen who had any connection with the first worshippers of the Almighty would observe the maxims by which they regulated the affairs of life, and would naturally borrow from them; and hence those original teachings became diffused throughout the world; and we find there is not an ancient nation on earth that is without its code of proverbs or proverbial maxims. The ancient Sanscrit is full of them; and they abound in the Persian and Arabic languages, and in all the dialects formed from these, in all the countries of the East. The Heetopadesa of Vishnoo Sarma, the Anvari Soheili, the Bahar Danush, Kalia we Durnna, and all the other forms of that original work; the fables of Lockman, Aesop, Phaedrus, Avienus, etc., are collections of proverbs, illustrated by their application to the most important purposes of domestic, social, and civil life.

Those nations with which we are best acquainted have their collections of proverbs; and perhaps those with which we are unacquainted have theirs also. Messrs. Visdelou and Galand formed a collection of Asiatic proverbs, and published it in their supplement to the Bibliotheque Orientate of Dâ€™Herbelot. This is a collection of very great worth, curiosity, and importance. Mr. J. Ray, F.R.S., formed a collection of this kind, particularly of such as are or have been in use in Great Britain: this is as curious as it is entertaining and useful.

The term Proverb, proverbium, compounded of pro, for, and verb, a word, speech, or saying, leads us to an original meaning of the thing itself. It was an allegorical saying, where *more* was meant than *met the eye* - a short saying that stood for a whole discourse, the words of which are metaphorical; e.g., this of the rabbins: *I have given thee my lamp: give me thy lamp. If thou keep my lamp, I will keep thy lamp; but if thou quench my lamp, I will quench thy lamp.* Here the word lamp is a metaphor:

1. For Divine revelation

2. For the human soul

I have given thee my word and Spirit; give me thy soul and heart. If thou observe my word, and follow the dictates of my Spirit, I will regulate thy heart, and keep thy soul from every evil; but if thou disobey my word, and quench my Spirit, I will withdraw my Spirit, leave thee to the hardness and darkness of thy own heart, and send thee at last into outer darkness. Such as this is properly the proverb; the word which stands for a discourse.

But the Hebrew *meshalim*, from *mashal*, to rule or govern, signifies a set or collection of weighty, wise, and therefore authoritative, sayings, whereby a man's whole conduct, civil and religious, is to be governed; sayings containing rules for the government of life. Or, as the Divine author himself expresses it in the beginning of the first chapter, the design is to lead men *to know wisdom and instruction, to*

perceive the words of understanding; to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; to give subtilty to the simple, and to the young man knowledge and discretion,â€• Proverbs 1:2, Proverbs 1:3. This was the design of proverbs; and perhaps it would be impossible to find out a better definition of the design and object of those of Solomon, than is contained in the two preceding verses. See my Dissertation on Parabolical Writing, at the end of the notes on Matthew 13 (note).

Of the three thousand proverbs which Solomon spoke, we have only those contained in this book and in Ecclesiastes; and of the one thousand and five songs which he made, only the Song of Solomon has been preserved: or, in other words, of all his numerous works in divinity, philosophy, morality, and natural history, only the three above mentioned, bearing his name, have been admitted into the sacred canon. His natural history of trees and plants, of beasts, fowls, and fishes, (for on all these he wrote), is totally lost. Curiosity, which never says, It is enough, would give up the three we have for those on the animal and vegetable kingdom, which are lost. What God judged of importance to the eternal interests of mankind, is preserved; and perhaps we know the vegetable and animal kingdoms now as well through Linnaeus and Buffon, and their followers, as we should have known them, had Solomonâ€™s books on natural history come down to our time. Others would investigate nature, and to them those researches were left. Solomon spoke by inspiration; and therefore to him Divine doctrines were communicated, that he might teach them to man. Every man in his order. The book of Proverbs has been divided into five parts:

I. A master is represented as instructing his scholar, giving him admonitions, directions, cautions, and excitements to the study of wisdom, chapters 1-9.

II. This part is supposed to contain the Proverbs of Solomon, properly so called; delivered in distinct, independent, general sentences. From chapter 10 to chapter 22:16.

III. In this part the tutor again addresses himself to his pupil, and gives him fresh admonitions to the study of wisdom; which is followed by a set of instructions, delivered imperatively to the pupil, who is supposed all the while to be standing before him. From Proverbs 22:17 to chapter 25.

IV. This part is distinguished by being a selection of Solomonâ€™s Proverbs, made by the men of Hezekiah, conjectured to be Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah, who all flourished under that reign. This part, like the second, is composed of distinct, unconnected sentences, and extends from chapter 25 to chapter 30.

V. The fifth part contains a set of wise expostulations and instructions, which Agur, the son of Jakeh, delivered to his pupils, Ithiel and Ucal, chapter 30. And the thirty-first chapter contains the instructions which a mother, who is not named, gave to Lemuel her son, being earnestly desirous to guard him against vice, to establish him in the principles of justice, and to have him married to a wife of the best qualities. These two last chapters may be considered a kind of Appendix to the book of Proverbs: see Dr. Taylor; but others suppose that the thirty-first chapter contains Bathshebaâ€™s words to Solomon, and his commendation of his mother.

There are many repetitions and some transpositions in the book of Proverbs, from which it is very probable that they were not all made at the same time; that they are the work of different authors, and have been collected by various hands: but still the sum total is delivered to us by Divine inspiration; and whoever might have been the original authors of distinct parts, the Divine Spirit has made them all its own by handing them to us in this form. Some attribute the collection, i.e., the formation of this collection, to Isaiah; others, to Hilckiah, and Shebna the scribe; and others, to Ezra.

That Solomon could have borrowed little from his predecessors is evident from this consideration, that all uninspired ethic writers, who are famous in history, lived after his times. Solomon began to reign A.M. 2989, which was 239 years before the first Olympiad; 479 before Cyrus, in whose time flourished the seven wise men of Greece; 679 before Alexander the Great, under whose reign flourished Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; and 1011 before the birth of Christ. Therefore to the Gentiles he could be but little, if at all, indebted.

It is impossible for any description of persons to read the book of Proverbs without profit. Kings and courtiers, as well as those engaged in trade, commerce, agriculture, and the humblest walks of life, may here read lessons of instruction for the regulation of their conduct in their respective circumstances. Fathers, mothers, wives, husbands, sons, daughters, masters, and servants, may here also learn their respective duties; and the most excellent rules are laid down, not only in reference to morality, but to civil policy and economy. Many motives are employed by the wise man to accomplish the end at which he aims; motives derived from honor, interest, love, fear, natural affection, and piety towards God. The principal object he has in view is, to inspire a deep reverence for God, fear of his judgments and an ardent love for wisdom and virtue. He exhibits injustice, impiety, profligacy, idleness, imprudence, drunkenness, and almost every vice, in such lively colors as to render every man ashamed of them who has any true respect for his interest, honor, character, or health. And as there is nothing so directly calculated to ruin young men, as bad company, debauch, and irregular connections, he labors to fortify his disciples with the most convincing reasons against all these vices, and especially against indolence, dissipation, and the company of lewd women.

Maxims to regulate life in all the conditions already mentioned, and to prevent the evils already described, are laid down so copiously, clearly, impressively, and in such variety, that every man who wishes to be instructed may take what he chooses, and, among multitudes, those which he likes best.

Besides the original Hebrew, the book of Proverbs exists in the following ancient versions: the Chaldee, Septuagint, Syriac, Vulgate, and Arabic. But the Septuagint takes greater liberty with the sacred text than any of the rest: it often transposes, changes, and adds; and all these to a very considerable extent. This is the version which is quoted in the New Testament. Several of these additions, as well as the most important changes, the reader will find noticed in the following notes; but to mark them all would require a translation of almost the whole Greek text. How our forefathers understood several passages will be seen by quotations from an ancient MS. in my possession, which begins with this book, and extends to the conclusion of the New Testament. It is well written upon strong vellum, in very large folio, and highly illuminated in the beginning of each book, and first letter of each chapter. The language is more antiquated than in the translation commonly attributed to Wiclif. It was once the property of Thomas a Woodstock, youngest son of Edward III., and brother of John of Gaunt and the Black Prince. I have often quoted this MS in my notes on the New Testament.