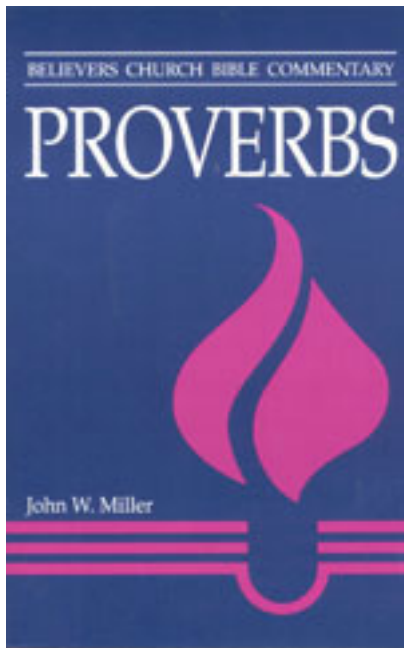


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**Miller, John W.**

***Proverbs***

Believers Church Bible Commentary

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The commentary seeks to clarify the composition history of Proverbs by defending a distinctive thesis, anticipated by the talmudic attribution of Proverbs to the men of Hezekiah (*b. B. Bat.* 15a) and by several modern studies (by Estes, Bullock, and McKane) that hypothesize a Solomonic manual enlarged by a Hezekiah or a late-kingship edition of Proverbs. Serving an Anabaptist-Mennonite series committed to imparting the original, simple sense of Scripture and its contemporary meaning, the commentary is written in a style unburdened by academic jargon. The essays appended on pages 311–30 provide more detailed and documented accounts of the distinctive features of the work vis-à-vis the current scholarly positions on the issues at hand.

The central thesis is that Proverbs began as a Solomonic edition passionate about acquiring wisdom that was then expanded, modified, and “Yahwehized” by the men of Hezekiah, thereby constituting a contribution to the Hezekiah reform movement along with editions of prophetic texts by contemporaneous prophets (Isaiah, Micah, Amos, Hosea) and Deuteronomy, which is presumed to have been published at this time and then rediscovered a century later under Josiah. The men in question are identified with Mosaist and Yahwist Levite descendants of Abiathar whom Solomon dismissed at his

coronation (1 Kgs 2:26; cf. 2 Sam. 8:17), leaving Jerusalem in the hands of Zadokite priests (1 Kgs 2:35) who would have tolerated polytheism. The thesis seems compatible with Friedman's positions, which it never cites.

The thesis envisions a conscious arrangement of the contents of the Hezekiah edition of Proverbs in three collections: the introductory part 1 of the 256 verses at 1:1–9:18; the main part 2 of 375 verses at 10:1–22:16; and the supplemental appendices or part 3 of 253 verses at 22:17–30:33. The main collection is deemed to be arranged for study in two sets of thirty-seven five-proverb panels (10:1–16:1 and 16:7–22:16), which enclose the central panel of five Yahwistic proverbs at 16:2–6. These five proverbs, all being Yahwistic, and uniquely so on this account, are understood by Miller to be the epicenter of the Hezekiah edition as a whole. Miller by the way regards the term "Proverbs" a misnomer for the genre of the contents and argues that "intricate didactic poems" is a more befitting description.

The analysis of part 1 inductively unpacks the core convictions of each edition, Solomon's and Hezekiah's. These convictions are teased out of marked differences in the manner of address, self-presentation, and the use of the divine name characterizing the blocks constituting part 1. The contents of 4:1–5:14, contra the NIV, do not address "my sons" but "sons" (4:1; 5:7–14). The reference to their "teachers" (5:13) implies that the sons are students and that the setting is that of royal schools. The intervening reference to "son" in 4:4–27 is part of the teaching discourse attributed to Solomon (4:3) and represents teaching that Solomon himself received from his father David. The Solomonic poems hardly ever refer to God but only to wisdom. If they do refer to God, they do so to stress that wisdom plays the chief role in revealing him and his works (8:30–36; on Miller's reading of 8:30, "Then I [wisdom] was with him [the] master craftsman," wisdom is not an agent in the process of creation but only reveals that process; cf. 25:2). The other blocks of poems in this section (1:8–3:35; 5:15–7:27) address the listener not as "son" but as "my son" and urge him to listen to "his father" and "his mother" (1:8; 6:20). These sections are also replete with references to Yhwh and teach the listener to put his trust in God and to not rely on his own understanding (3:5). By clarifying that wisdom is a metaphor, poems such as 3:19–20 restrain the reader from interpreting wisdom later in chapter 8 as an independent divinity. All this is attributed to the work of the men of Hezekiah, who may thus be revealed to agree that wisdom is indeed supreme (*rēšît*) but who are careful to spell out that the path to her begins with "the fear of the LORD" (1:7a; 9:10).

The analysis of the contents of part 2, chapters 10–21, acknowledges that the arrangement of its constituent proverbs seems baffling but sets out to demonstrate that it is after all ordered. As noted above, 16:2–6 are held to be the epicenter of two sets of thirty-seven

five-proverb blocks at 10:1–16:1 and 16:7–22:16. The clue for the arrangement in groups of five, the number of fingers on a hand, is taken from 7:4. However, as time constraints prevent this hypothesis from being tested, a thematic approach is adopted. The 275 proverbs are thus reclassified into eight categories, tabulated on pages 114–15, and grouped as such for eight subsequent subsections of the commentary focusing on economics (166–84); family (155–84); knowledge of the Holy One (206–21); matters of the heart (197–205); nationhood (131–42); personal relations (185–96); speech (143–54); and wisdom (116–30). However useful such classifications may be to the preacher, scholar, and student, there is nevertheless no discussion of how they may limit the senses granted to each proverb by its actual immediate context, a phenomenon that constitutes one of the particularly fascinating aspects of the study of Proverbs today. The present decision to reclassify the proverbs thematically and then comment on subordinate thematic groupings leads Miller seemingly to speak of these groups as actual “blocks” or “sections” of the book. Thus, 17:15, 26; 18:5, 17; and 21:12 are described on page 134 as a “block” relating to courts of law, while page 206 refers to all proverbs pertaining to knowledge of the Holy One as “this section of Proverbs.” The impression conveyed that we are dealing with a real historical block or section begs the question why the men of Hezekiah failed to adopt a similar thematic approach and chose to adopt something quite different. The underlying motivations of their arrangement are thus left untackled.

The commentary on the supplemental collections of part 3 stresses the stylistic similarity of all their respective headings and ultimately attributes them all to the men of Hezekiah, except for Prov 31. The explanation that Lemuel is the addressee rather than the author of Prov 31, the observation that this chapter contains Aramaisms (should not Lemuel’s mother use Aramaisms?), the fit between the portrait of the wife-mother in 31:10–31 with known data about the entrepreneurial freedom of married women in the Persian period, and several other factors are taken as sufficient warrant to suspect that the chapter is a postexilic addition. Two corollaries follow this argumentation.

The first is to encourage the suspicion deriving from the realization that Agur is an ardent Yahwist that the Hezekiah edition concludes with chapter 30, the words of Agur. Contra the frequent portrayal of Agur as a skeptic, Miller notes that 30:3 should be read as stating that “he *has not learned wisdom* but knows *the Knowledge of the most Holy One*,” which, in view of his reproof of the wise for “subverting, replacing and adding to God’s words” (30:5–6) and his expressed wish to remain faithful to Yhwh (30:7–9), also conforms his theology to that of the men of Hezekiah. Given the honorable setting of his proverbs at the end of the work, Miller opines that he played a central editorial role in the production of Proverbs.

The second corollary is that the relegation of chapter 31 to the Persian period leaves the reader to infer that concluding paean to the woman of valor is also extraneous to either of the first two editions. In light of this, it would have been desirable to see covered more fully arguments that would have noted why the praise of the woman “who fears the Lord” in 31:30 is often taken as a fitting inclusio for the collection as a whole. Its removal thus robs the work of the expected inclusio. Preserving Prov 31 would not spoil the central thesis of the work. It would, on the other hand, allow the commentary to engage with the more exciting discussions of the structure and theology of Proverbs that lead the reader to surmise that heavenly wisdom needs to be sought in a concrete woman of flesh and blood in her role as wife, mother, and philanthropist. Furthermore, given that such a woman is active in her fear of the Lord and contributes to God’s work as man’s helpmate, any parallels between her social diligence and maternity and all that Proverbs says of wisdom may serve as a caveat against seeing wisdom’s role to be purely revelatory and not at all participative as far as the work of creation is concerned.

In the commentary, each block of text selected for comment is treated under three headings. The first, titled “Explanatory Notes,” focuses on explanations of headings, purpose statements, and watch words and thus seemingly aims to convey the simple meaning of the text, its immediate editorial context and purpose. The key motifs then become the subject of commentary in the next two sections, entitled “The Text in Biblical Context” and “The Text in the Life of the Church.” The horizon of the latter is very broad and ranges from Anabaptist-Mennonite rulings on oath-taking to Eckhart’s reflections on communion with God, to the United Nations charter on human rights and Canadian Supreme Court decisions on corporal punishment. In addition to the appended essays, which summarize and flesh out the argument bibliographically, the final sections comprise an index of ancient sources as well as two overlapping bibliographies, the first of works cited (332–38; which is not an index), the second of selected resources (339–42).

Given the scholarly uncertainties regarding the compositional history of Proverbs, the author must be thanked for providing a clear, coherent, and valuable documentary hypothesis about its origins.