SOLOMON AND THE BEGINNINGS OF WISDOM IN ISRAEL

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The traditional connection of the name of Solomon with books of Hebrew wisdom and poetry raises a series of related problems. It is quite out of the question that the king was in fact the composer of the whole book of Proverbs, of Ecclesiastes and Wisdom, of psalms canonical and extra-canonical: how then did his name come to be attached to them? If—as appears likely—the ultimate origin of this literary convention is the statement of 1 Reg. v 12 that “he uttered three thousand proverbs, and his song(s were) a thousand and five” 1, what reliance can be placed on this claim? Does it mean no more than that Solomon was credited with these accomplishments because wisdom literature and poetry flourished at his court and under his patronage 2? Are the accounts of Solomon’s superlative wisdom and fame a legendary embellishment of history? If so, what was the historical basis of these accounts, and when and why did the embellishment take place? How is this picture of Solomon’s wisdom as intellectual brilliance and literary productivity to be related to the quite different interpretation of it—as discernment to render justice—in the famous story of the dream at Gibeon?

Many scholars seem to accept almost at its face value the story in 1 Reg. v 9-14 of Solomon’s superlative literary gifts and fame, and hence have no difficulty in regarding him as the earliest patron, and indeed the fountain-head, of Israelite wisdom. Eissfeldt, for example, speaks of the “ganz richtig festgehaltenen Tatsache, dass Salomo an seinem Hof die Weisheitsdichtung gepflegt hat und auch selbst auf

1) LXX “five thousand”.
2) R. Eisler draws attention to the parallel claim of Ashurbanipal to have written the tablets of his library; AJSL 42 (1926), p. 73, note 1. He says that Nabû gave him wisdom, and he acquired the arts of reading and writing; cf. D. D. Luckenbill, Ancient Records of Babylonia and Assyria, ii, secs. 767, 934, 986.
diesem Gebiet sehr fruchtbar gewesen ist” 1). Similarly BAUMGARTNER in his 1951 survey of recent studies in the Wisdom Literature comments that “there is now again more disposition to treat seriously the ascription of both (Prov. x 1—xxii 16 and xxv—xxix) to Solomon” 2). Most historians of Israel and commentators on the Wisdom books allow a greater or lesser degree of historical substance to the Solomonic tradition 3), but there remains considerable scepticism about the antiquity and reliability of the more extravagant accounts of Solomon’s wealth and wisdom. CAUSSE calls these “le mirage salomonien”, and H. WHEELER ROBINSON says of Solomon’s “posthumous reputation for wisdom” that “it is not easy to decide just where the historic Solomon ends and the legendary accretions begin” 4). SKINNER, who accepts the tradition of Solomon’s wisdom as substantially historical, nevertheless acknowledges that the description of it in 1 Reg. v 9-14, “with its backward look to the shadowy personages of a hoary antiquity . . . . can hardly have come from an ancient source” 5). ALBRIGHT infers that Solomon’s literary production, of which “nothing seems to have been directly preserved, . . . . was more prolific than inspired” 6).

1) O. EISSFELDT, Einleitung in das Alte Testament, p. 527.
6) W. F. ALBRIGHT, From the Stone Age to Christianity (1940), p. 224.