WHOSE WORDS? QOHELETH, HOSEA AND ATTRIBUTION IN BIBLICAL LITERATURE

BY

STUART WEEKS

Durham

The term ‘Qoheleth’ has puzzled readers for many centuries, and perhaps since its very inception, but most commentators have taken it to be a real name or title by which the author of the book of Ecclesiastes wishes to be identified, so that the attribution is essentially the same as the attribution to an author on the fly-leaf of any modern book. In this respect, the treatment of Qoheleth resembles the usual scholarly approach to authorial ascription in the Bible: when books are attributed to an individual, that individual is being identified, rightly or wrongly, as the writer or originator of the material within those books. Modern scholarship is not, of course, so naïve as to assume that all such attributions are reliable guides to actual authorship: few scholars would accept, for instance, that Solomon wrote Proverbs, any more than they would accept the authorial claims of many later apocalyptic books or testimonies. In

1 I am grateful for the opportunity to thank Tony Gelston, not for the hard task of filling his shoes at Durham, but for a personal kindness long ago. The Society for Old Testament Study is noted for its warmth and collegiality, but for a young student at his first conference and still clinging to his supervisor’s coat-tails, it proved a little intimidating. Tony, who didn’t know me from Adam at that time, made a point of talking to me at meals and taking an interest in what I was doing, a kindness which I have since learned to be quite typical. Would that all fine scholars were such fine humans as well.

2 The book of Ecclesiastes begins with a description of its content as “The words of Qoheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem”, which is later given further specification by Qoheleth’s claim to have ruled Israel from Jerusalem. What follows is a first-person speech by this Qoheleth, until in 12:9 a second voice describes Qoheleth and his writing in the third person. The word ‘Qoheleth’ does not seem to be a name, and is once used with the definite article (12:8; cf. LXX 7:27), suggesting that it may be a title; if so, there may be some connection with the root נְפָלָה, and thereby with ‘summoning’ or the ‘assembly’. All this is very uncertain, though.

3 G. Ogden, Qoheleth (Sheffield, 1987), p. 15, is fairly typical: “‘Qoheleth’... is the adopted name of the author of 1:2–12:8. He is an Israelite sage, who, according to the Editor’s testimony in 12:9–10, stood firmly within the wisdom tradition”.

such cases, though, the attributions are usually characterised as ‘pseudonymous’; they are taken to have the same fly-leaf function as genuine attributions, but with the name of the real author replaced by that of another individual – usually someone famous from the past.

This approach seems to be informed more by the conventions of the modern and classical worlds than by ancient Near Eastern practice. The extant materials do not suggest that authorial attribution was expected for most non-documentary literature in the ancient world. Those texts, mostly Egyptian, which do bear attributions generally belong to particular literary genres in which monologues or dialogues play some central role, and the attribution is of the words to a speaker, not of the book to a writer. Some examples may help to clarify the rationale behind this attribution of certain texts within literary cultures which generally preferred anonymity.

Two early instructions set the pattern: an Egyptian work attributed to Ptahhotep, and a Sumerian one attributed to Šuruppak. Although both works are amongst the earliest poetic literature from their respective cultures, neither is as old as it claims to be. The *Instruction of Ptahhotep* presents itself as the advice given by a vizier of the Fifth Dynasty, who lived in the early 24th century B.C.E.; it is unlikely, however, to have been written any earlier than three or four centuries after this vizier lived. Šuruppak may actually have been composed earlier than the 24th century – the Abu Salabikh text is generally dated to the middle of the third millennium – but it presents itself as being antediluvian. Even were there any reason to take the figure of Šuruppak as historical, then, it seems clear that both texts have been substantially back-dated, and that neither attribution is to the real writer.

Rather than just write this off as ‘pseudonymity’, though, we might usefully ask why these works have been attributed to long-dead individuals. For *Ptahhotep* an answer is suggested by the material which

---

4 In other cases, most notably literary letters, the attributions are clearly linked to the documentary form of the texts.

5 We have each work in more than one version. The principal edition of *Ptahhotep* is Z. Žába, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep* (Prague, 1956). There is a valuable new introduction and translation in R.B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940–1640 B.C.* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 246–72. For Šuruppak see especially B. Alster, *The Instructions of Šuruppak: a Sumerian Proverb Collection* (Copenhagen, 1974); there have been some subsequent textual discoveries. For fuller bibliography of these and other ancient instructions discussed below, see the appendix to my *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 162–89.