
In this monograph, Hatton contends that Proverbs is a considerably more complex text than interpreters who regularly gloss over the book’s contradictions and ambiguities have recognized. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossality, Hatton argues, in contrast, that Proverbs is a text that is “carefully composed and crafted” and the contradictions in the book are deliberately designed to “encourage readers to question traditional wisdom and to develop their critical faculties” (3). Throughout, Hatton compares Greek Proverbs with the Masoretic Text in order to demonstrate that at least one ancient reader also recognized the problems presented by Proverbs’ contradictions.

After explaining in Chapters 1 and 2 how Proverbs in the past has been undervalued by commentators, Hatton begins Chapter 3 by surveying various scholarly attempts to discover a degree of unity in the book. Hatton’s own analysis of Proverbs also begins in Chapter 3 where he argues that Proverbs 29 acts as “a sort of summary” of the previous teachings of the entire book and not merely the previous few chapters. Prov. 29:1, for instance, “describes the disastrous results that arise from ignoring reproof” (61) and importantly recalls the “depiction of incorrigibility” of Prov. 1:20-33 (62). In between these two texts a number of sayings explore the topic of heeding and ignoring reproof (e.g., 10: 17; 12: 1; etc.). Prov. 1:20-33 and 29:1, thus, form a frame within which Proverbs explores a complex issue, but “neither silences nor denies the validity of other voices” on this topic (65). For Hatton, this is evidence of “a deeper tendency in the book to allow the articulation of antithetical viewpoints” (64). Hatton identifies a number of other texts in Proverbs that function similarly. For instance, Proverbs’ teaching on poverty and laziness is framed by Proverbs 6 and 24 and 30.

In Chapter 4, Hatton claims that Koch’s thesis—that in the Bible, including Proverbs, the divine does not intervene directly in the world to execute retribution but that deeds carry the seeds of their own consequences—cannot be sustained. Rather, Proverbs contains sayings that suggest both viewpoints. For Hatton, this provides evidence of tension and debate in Proverbs regarding divine and human agency. Distinct voices “clash” (93) and thus provoke the reader to further thought.

Chapter 5, where Hatton explores aspects of Proverbs’ teaching about kings and rulers, is arguably the most provocative section of the book. As the reader expects by now, Hatton understands this teaching as characterized by deliberate contradiction designed to spur the reader’s critical attention. Hatton identifies intriguing links between Prov. 6: 6-8 and 30:24-31, which frame the book’s discussion of kingship with the notion that “kings are not necessary” (127). He similarly contends in his Chapter 6 that the proverbial teaching around bribes and gifts is framed by 6:32-5 and 21:14. Proverbs recognizes pragmatically that bribes often work, but also hints at a criticism of those who undertake the practice.

In his concluding Chapter 7, Hatton contends that “many more examples” (149) of contradictions that reveal the book’s dialogic nature can be found in Proverbs. An
example will be the book’s teaching on speech and silence. In particular, Prov. 17: 28, which notes that even a fool who keeps silent will be considered wise, calls into question the book’s teaching about the value of silence. Hatton also distinguishes his perspectives from those of deconstructive critics and suggests (but does not insist on) a possible scribal Sitz im Leben of the final redactor in Persian Yehud (165).

There is much to commend in Hatton’s work. His presentation of the history of the undervaluing of Proverbs in Old Testament studies is reliable and his analysis of the texts of Proverbs is regularly subtle and insightful, demonstrating his finely honed literary sensitivities. His efforts to demonstrate the complexity and sophistication of Proverbs teaching and literary structure is a welcome corrective to approaches that caricature the book’s instruction as simplistic and its design as essentially random. Of course, any provocative thesis will leave readers with certain questions. In the spirit of continuing the dialogue on Proverbs that Hatton’s book provokes, several are offered here.

First, without denying the presence of contradictions in Proverbs, one wonders whether the clash of voices that Hatton discovers is as distinct as he claims. Is the fact, for instance, that Proverbs recognizes that kings may be capricious but also instruments of justice evidence of conflicting voices? Can it not be viewed simply as the complex view of a single voice? One wonders, too, whether Hatton’s discovery of the dialogue of voices on the topic of divine and human agency in Proverbs is not dependent on his framing of the question in terms of Koch’s thesis.

Hatton also repeatedly claims that the contradictions and ambiguities in Proverbs are designed to provoke thought so that the reader can “act wisely” and “responsibly” (170). What, however, is the content of the wisdom that Proverbs hopes to instill in its readers? If the book’s diverse teaching about reproof, poverty, or any other topic is designed to provoke reflection, does it simply leave its readers to their own devices to construct, at the appropriate moment, their own moral systems and orientations? Hatton is silent on this question, but one wonders whether the majority of Proverbs’ teachings do not provide a context of wisdom within which the critical reflection of which Hatton speaks ought to be undertaken. Put otherwise, does the text itself not propose certain norms that can guide the reader’s critical reflection?

Hatton also attributes significant moral and intellectual sophistication to the editor-author he believes was able to push beyond the simple moralism of traditional wisdom by arranging the book’s thought provoking contradictions. Might it not be the case, however, that rather than a lone moral genius, Proverbs represents the labors of a sophisticated proverbial wisdom tradition that never understood its own rhetoric and teaching exclusively in terms of a simple, literal retributive logic? Certainly Hatton amply demonstrates that the Greek rendering assimilates MT’s contradictions and ambiguities in the direction of the book’s retributive rhetoric. Nonetheless one wonders if Proverbs’ contradictions and ambiguities are designed not simply to stimulate thought, as Hatton so ably contends, but also to provoke reflection on how to understand precisely the text’s dominant Act-Consequence discourse—its traditional wisdom—in more than simple literal terms. Indeed, a deep faith in the genuine moral