WHO WERE THE "MEN OF HEZEKIAH"
(PROVERBS XXV 1)?

by

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Though the word "king" appears more than 30 times in the book of Proverbs, the only Israelite kings actually mentioned by name there are Solomon and Hezekiah. The headings in Prov. i 1, x 1 and xxv 1 identify the proverbs they introduce as "Solomon's", fitting the description of his wisdom in 1 Kings. The emergence of the Israelite wisdom tradition with the consolidation of Solomon's kingdom is plausible enough—a strong central government needs an educated class of administrators—and indeed such writers as A. Alt and G. von Rad have tried to treat this "Solomonic enlightenment" as a historical fact. The consensus of opinion today, however, is better represented by this statement of James L. Crenshaw: "In sum, our examination of the biblical traditions about Solomon's wisdom discovers no shred of evidence deriving from the era of that king." Instead, wisdom traditions are assumed to have clustered around the literary character of Solomon as the legendary wisest of all men. By contrast, the notice in Prov. xxv 1 that these particular Solomonic proverbs were "transmitted" (hešiqû) by the

1 More recently this view has been defended in somewhat subtler fashion by Walter A. Brueggemann, "The Social Significance of Solomon as a Patron of Wisdom", in John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (ed.), The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East (Winona Lake, Ind., 1990), pp. 117-32, on which see further below.


3 The root šq seems to have had an original meaning of "proceed" or "advance", as in Gen. xii 8, xxvi 22. The unusual usage of Prov. xxv 1, by an extension of this meaning, is generally taken as indicating that the men of Hezekiah were passing along wisdom from an earlier time, that is, copying it. The notion of "editing" suggested by Whybray may be understood as part of the process but is not, I think, expressed in this verb ("The Sage in the Israelite Royal Court", in The Sage in Israel [n. 1], p. 138).
men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, seems rather specific. It is this specificity, and the notice's apparent lack of tendentiousness, which have led scholars to accept it as historical evidence for "a school or scribal establishment under royal patronage, where literary records of the past were assembled and new literature was produced". "There is no reason", argues Crenshaw, "for the tradition to arise associating Hezekiah with wisdom unless a historical basis for such thinking existed". My purpose in this article is to suggest that there is, in fact, another reason for this association, and hence Prov. xxv 1 should not necessarily be taken at face value as historical.

Instead, I propose to explain the reference to Hezekiah as another example of a literary phenomenon found elsewhere in the Bible, in the historical superscriptions to certain psalms. On the assumption that the expression ledavid indicated an authorial or at least biographical connection to King David, a number of psalms acquired superscriptions linking their composition to specific events in David's life, of which most are known to us from the books of Samuel. Ps. iii, for example, is entitled, "A psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom". The key to the connection between

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6 (n. 2) pp. 25 and 94. More recently, similar sentiments are expressed by Roland E. Murphy, The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature (New York, 1990) pp. 5 and 22, and by a wide range of scholars in The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East.
7 Patrick Skehan attempted to make the same point. But he gave no reason for the use of Hezekiah's name in the verse other than its numerical value. See "A Single Editor for the Whole Book of Proverbs" (revised version) in Studies in Ancient Israelite Poetry and Wisdom (Washington, DC, 1971), 23; the article is reprinted in James L. Crenshaw (ed.), Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom (New York, 1976). The editor might equally well have chosen the word hkhnym or, even better, the phrase milky-yhdh, both of which have the same numerical value. The arithmetic does not even work correctly: hzqyh = 130, but there are 139 verses and, according to the analysis of Eissfeldt, 128 proverbs in the section. (See Otto Eissfeldt, The Old Testament: An Introduction [Oxford and New York and Evanston, 1965], p. 475 = Einleitung in das Alte Testament [3rd edn, Tübingen, 1964], p. 643). Finally, Skehan's hypothesis does not explain the words hly-hzqyh, "men of Hezekiah".