

# Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 13

## International Wisdom

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This is Dr. Knut Heim in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 13, International Dimension of Biblical Wisdom Literature. Welcome to the lecture 13 on the Biblical book of Proverbs.

In this lecture, I want to focus on the international dimension of the books in the Bible that have been for many decades now described as wisdom literature. In particular, the book of Proverbs, but also the book of Ecclesiastes, the book of Job, and to a degree the book called Song of Solomon. In the early part of the 20th century, British scholar Norman Snaith published a very influential and very timely book called *The Distinctiveness of the Old Testament*.

Why would he have to write such a book about the distinctiveness of the Old Testament? Well, the reason, of course, must be that some people were questioning whether the Old Testament really was distinctive enough to be genuinely considered divine revelation, different from everything else around it in the contemporary milieu when it was written, composed, and collected. Why did this question arise? Well, since the 1700s, especially the 1800s, we have had a huge amount of discovery of ancient Near Eastern source texts that were to a degree similar to some portions in the Old Testament. This was a very exciting time of discovery that was beginning to put the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, into a larger cultural and historical context from which we were beginning to understand the Bible not just as a completely otherworldly and directly from above-inspired book that had no connections with human experience elsewhere.

So, this was exciting, and scholars began to draw all sorts of parallels, connections, comparisons, and many similarities but also differences were discovered throughout the different parts of the various Old Testament texts. And this included, increasingly, texts also that were related to the Book of Proverbs, the Book of Ecclesiastes, and the Book of Job. There are two important collections of books that are documenting these parallels, similarities, and differences.

The famous ancient Near Eastern texts relating to the Old Testament by James Pritchard, often abbreviated ANET, Ancient Near Eastern Texts. And then, more recently, the multi-volume work, very up-to-date, more recent, edited by Hallow, called *The Context of Scripture*. The questions, however, that were beginning to arise from a theological perspective is, so if the various parts of the Old Testament are so similar to other productions, and thought patterns, down to specific formulations, phrases, expressions, and various kinds of ideas about the interaction between humans and God, or the gods, what then remained that was special about the Old

Testament? And it was against this background that Norman Snaith highlighted a number of things that were truly distinctive for the ancient scriptures, the holy scriptures of Israel.

And among these, he would highlight things like the patriarch's monotheistic orientation towards only one God and the historical experience of the Exodus. There were a number of other things, but those are the most essential ones. Now, what's fascinating when we look at those books that have commonly been related to or designated wisdom literature, monotheism is there, but the patriarchs are not, the Exodus is not, and the temple is not.

And the Torah, the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, is only, if at all, only kind of alluded to in very veiled ways, perhaps especially in Proverbs chapter 2. So the question then arises, are the books of the old, of the wisdom books, perhaps even more related to texts from the ancient Near Eastern milieu? And as we continued to make discoveries of ancient Near Eastern texts, this impression began to be confirmed more and more, to the point where in 1922, the French Egyptologist Budge published a newly discovered Egyptian text by the teachings of Amenemope, which I mentioned a few lectures ago, and it was very quickly afterward, in 1924, that the German Egyptologist Adolf Ehrman discovered that there is in fact a section, or various sections, in the book of Amenemope and the book of Proverbs, where several verses, over 11 of them, are almost word for word the same. The question that was now beginning to be raised, and people were beginning to get very excited about this, is who copied from whom? Especially when people wanted to continue to emphasize the divine inspiration of Scripture and this particular part of scripture. Early on, there was a felt need by some to defend and say, well, surely for this portion of the book of Proverbs to be divinely inspired, it would have had to have been the original from which Amenemope would have copied.

Now, one or two people have made that case, but by and large, not very successfully. Most people now agree, and have been arguing for a very long time, that the teachings of Amenemope are much earlier, several hundred years in fact earlier than even an earlier stating of the book of Proverbs. And there are a number of other reasons that now really have led to a broad consensus, which would include, I think, virtually every Old Testament scholar from every background and persuasion, to agree that the book of Proverbs has creatively reused the teachings of or sections of the teachings of the book of Amenemope.

We will, in the next lecture, look at some of the detailed similarities, so that you will gain a flavor of this. But for now, I want to remain with further, kind of more general comments about the international dimension of biblical wisdom literature. And from the perspective of several decades of reflection among scholars, biblical scholars, both from Christian, Jewish, and non-religious backgrounds, I think it is now relatively

safe to say that we do not need to sustain the idea of a uniqueness of the Old Testament in order to appreciate that it can also be truly inspired.

And the reason for this is because in the 21st century, and here I think we have been helped with by the entire idea of post-modernism, we are beginning to appreciate that something does not have to be unique to be valuable. And from a theological and hermeneutical perspective, it is now, I think, very appropriate and very enriching to be able to say that in significant parts of the Christian Bible, including the Old Testament and the New Testament, the same thing is true for various sections, the biblical writers, the human authors, have drawn on the very best philosophical, theological, ethical, moral, political writings and traditions of their time. And they did so under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with true wisdom.

So, what they have found elsewhere, drawing on the best of human insight, including from other religious persuasions, they have reused this creatively under divine guidance in order to construct a broader, deeper, wiser, more from a Christian and Jewish perspective, more truthful construction of how the Judeo-Christian God interacts with human beings. So this is an exciting discovery. It is something that helps us also in the modern world to appreciate that there is real truth and true wisdom in other religious and non-religious traditions in the human experience.

And believing Christians and Jews can draw on the best of human experience, the best of human insight, including scientific discovery, in order to reach deeper insight into the nature of the universe and the depth and the subtleties and the breadth of the human experience of the divine. We will stop here for a moment before we turn to the second part of Lecture 13. In this second part of Lecture 13, I want to briefly now talk about the very designation of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Songs as wisdom literature.

Where does that idea of categorizing those four books as wisdom literature even come from? As far as I know, and I've done a little bit of work on this, it was not until the 20th century, the early 1900s, that academics, scholars, professors, pastors, and rabbis have begun to call these four books of wisdom writings or wisdom literature. Why? Well, it seems to have been to a degree, as the scholarly and academic engagement with the biblical text continued into the 19th and 20th centuries, that people were beginning to become much more aware of the fact that these three, perhaps four books, were quite distinct in orientation and in form from the rest of the Old Testament. Until then, in both the Jewish and the Christian traditions, these texts were really seen among, in the Christian tradition, among poetic texts.

And so, it is not surprising that Ecclesiastes, Job, and Proverbs cluster around the Book of Psalms. Whereas in the Jewish tradition, they had been associated with the writings, the third part of the Jewish canon, which consisted most importantly of the Torah, the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, the prophets, and then the writings.

And among the writings, Jewish tradition included not only these books, but also books like Esther, Ezra Nehemiah, and so on, the Book of Lamentations.

And so, there are different ways in which these books could be categorized. And it was not until the early 20th century, especially with the important work of Hermann Gunkel, a German theologian, on genre criticism or form criticism, that people were beginning to become acutely aware that these particular books, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Job, and to a degree, Psalms and Solomons, were very distinct from many of the Old Testament texts, the other Old Testament texts, but more similar to some of the texts of the ancient Near East, particularly in Mesopotamia and in Egypt. The people who then coined the genre designation, Wisdom Literature, for these books, were people who were beginning to realize that wisdom, both as a term, but also as a persona, as we have seen, features more prominently in these books than any other theological or philosophical or instructional or ethical term.

And so I guess it was just a natural thing to happen that people began to eventually really acknowledge the distinctiveness of these books and gave it a name, namely Wisdom Literature. So much so that biblical scholars who also engaged in the study of ancient Near Eastern texts from Egypt and Babylonia, were beginning to then call texts that they found there that were most similar to these now newly designated wisdom writings in the Old Testament, also wisdom texts of Mesopotamian or Egyptian background. Most famously Wilfred Lambert from the University of Birmingham in England wrote a very fine collection of a book dealing with a very fine collection of what he called Babylonian wisdom literature.

A fine collection that has been in print continuously for over 40 years now. A fabulous collection of Babylonian texts that the Babylonians themselves did not call wisdom literature, but that Lambert, who was both very much a scholar of the Old Testament and also of Mesopotamian literature, quite freely and quite naturally felt he had full support to designate as Babylonian wisdom literature. Now fast forward to the 21st century, not actually to the middle of the last third or so of the 20th century, one of the consequences of all of this was that in the great and famous and influential Old Testament theologies of Christian theologians, Christian Old Testament scholars, the wisdom literature had next to no impact.

So even in the multi-volume Old Testament theologies of people like, my mind has just gone blank for a moment, just give me a moment, by von Raat and the other one has just escaped my mind. It will come back to me in a moment. Only one or two or ten or fifteen pages at most were dedicated to this so-called wisdom literature because it did not fit into those distinctives.

Von Raat, I think, his engagement with all of these books was not more than ten, fifteen pages or so, which was really insufficient and von Raat himself recognized this. And then in 1968 wrote a very influential book called *Die Weisheit Israels*, which

was in 1970 translated into English as *The Wisdom of Israel*. And this book, more than any other book of the 20th century, has really influenced the development of a keen flourishing interest in wisdom literature in the last quarter of the 20th century, reaching into the present day.

The Book of Proverbs in particular has had a flurry of fabulous scholarly studies. The same thing is true for Ecclesiastes and also for Job, and to a degree also for the Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs. And partly this was to do with the fact that people were fascinated and interested in the international dimension of these books, but to another degree, it also had to do with the fact that through von Raat's work and his fabulous book, people were beginning to realize that the wisdom literature was touching on practical and philosophical and theological issues that related to the experience of God and of life of ancient Israel in a way that seemed relevant, interesting, practical for the modern world.

And so it is not surprising that we have had a flourishing engagement in the academy and in the church to a degree increasingly in recent, in the last 20 years or so, a fascination with the so-called wisdom literature. Some of the results, especially for the Book of Proverbs for example, are documented in fabulous commentaries like this one by Bruce Waltke, a two-volume commentary coming to well over a thousand pages, and also by Jewish academic scholar Michael Fox, also a two-volume work. I have here the second volumes of each series that are phenomenally detailed, phenomenally academically erudite, and full of insight and wisdom that really makes this book come alive.

I personally got excited and interested in wisdom literature in the 1980s as a seminary student for this very reason. The excitement of the international dimension and the practical relevance of these books. Fascinating! Now fast forward now to the 21st century, and it is fascinating to see how this happens.

After a large period of several decades in the early 20th century of neglect of the biblical wisdom literature, we then moved into a fascination with biblical wisdom literature from roughly 1970 to about 2005, 2010. But then it seems like this whole development, the macro development of scholarly engagement and interest has come to a degree to full circle. Namely, in the early 2010s or so, the last seven, eight, ten years or so, a number of publications have appeared by eminent biblical scholars, for example, Mark Sneed, and also William Kynes, both of whom American scholars, who are now beginning to question the very genre designation of wisdom literature.

They have begun to study the broader, longer development of scholarly engagement with these texts, and they are pointing out and helping us again to recognize that the very notion of wisdom literature is a very recent one in the engagement with those texts, and it is to a degree, as they argue, an artificial one. Why did it take us decades to rediscover this? Well, this is one of the things that seems to happen sometimes.

Once somebody says something, everybody gets excited about it for a time, and then someone else comes along and recognizes that everybody was kind of fascinated with one particular thing, but didn't pay attention to something else that was going on in that same field.

And so, I think what we have now is a taking seriously of this tension that I've already hinted at earlier on in this lecture, namely to do with, so how does the wisdom literature and its apparently so different approach to theology, to religion, to practical life, fit into the wider cultural milieu of Israel itself? In earlier decades, most clearly seen perhaps in the commentary and work of William McCain, also from the 1970s, people were explaining the difference between the so-called wisdom literature and the rest of the Old Testament by saying that the people who produced this literature were of a different kind from the people who produced the rest of the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament. So much so that they were saying that they were secular in their orientation. They were not priests, they were not prophets, but they were courtiers, specialists, intellectual specialists who had almost nothing to do with the rest of the great religious tradition of their nation and of their culture, but they were international elite intelligentsia of its day.

Gerhard von Rath himself most famously talked of an enlightenment period at the court of King Solomon that brought this flourishing of the so-called wisdom literature into existence. The problem with that, however, is at least twofold. Problem number one is that the very notion of ancient people being secular is simply anachronistic.

Secularism as an idea and as a social reality is really, if we think about it, a glitch. A glitch in human experience. It is a glitch geographically because it only exists in Western Europe, in North America, to a significant degree.

It is also a glitch historically because it has only been in existence as an idea since the European Enlightenment from the 16th and 17th centuries onwards but as a politically and culturally influential phenomenon. It has only begun to become important since the end of World War I in 1918. So, historically speaking, secularism is a glitch.

Now, much more could be said about secularism, but this is not a lecture about secularism, but about the so-called wisdom texts of the Old Testament, so I want to come back to that. But it is important to understand that when we talk of secular ideas in the Old Testament or any other writing of the ancient Near East, we are being thoroughly anachronistic and really unrealistic in what we are saying because we are imposing our own modern ideas on ancient texts and ancient people that they simply never even contemplated. The second... I've just lost my train of thought for a moment.

I'll just take a break here and gather my thoughts. So, welcome back to Lecture 13. I interrupted myself for a moment because I had lost my train of thought, but we are back on track.

And so, I had explained that secularism was one of the ways in which people were trying to explain this difference of the wisdom literature from the rest of the Old Testament. The other way in which people were explaining this is they were saying that these apparently secular authors and intellectual thinkers were also professionally and culturally distinctive from those authors who produced the other parts of Scripture. And the idea here was that these people were not priests, they were not prophets, they were not theologians, but they were political administrators.

They were situated at court, they were students of international literature, and they were academically engaged in discourse and discussions and interchange with their diplomatic counterparts from the courts of Egypt on the one hand and the courts of the various Mesopotamian powers on the other. And hence, there was this intellectual international influence, and in order to absorb the international dimensions of this, this would have been another explanation for the secular aspect, apparently secular aspects of this, people were de-theologizing the intellectual influence that they were now beginning to bring into the cultural milieu of their writings and into their culture of Israel. Now, increasingly in the 21st century, scholars of Muslim literature are beginning to realize that this construction is, as I have already mentioned, thoroughly anachronistic.

It is also anachronistic to a degree because many of us, and I would include myself until recently among those, we have in a way, again anachronistically, imposed our own ideals of the Western intellectual onto our favorite biblical texts. And I make here a very specific distinction between Western scholars and scholars and students of the Old Testament from other parts of the world, whether it's Latin America, Asia, Africa, and so on. It is particularly Western academics who have imposed this kind of thinking on the texts because Western academics very much operate in an intellectual milieu that is international, that is rationalistic, and secular to a large degree.

So, all of this to say that we have recent publications, and I want to again highlight two particular authors here, Mark Sneed and William Kynes, who have begun to say that these explanations are unrealistic and probably not convincing. It is far more likely, they are saying, that the authors who produced those texts, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, to a degree, Song of Solomon, were people who were naturally and thoroughly part of their own culture. There must be another reason why what they wrote is so different from the rest of the Old Testament of the Hebrew Bible.

And they are beginning to argue now and really making, I think, a much more coherent case for the fact that the authors were much more interested in religion, much more interested in believing in God, than earlier writers, including myself, have often admitted. And that should not be surprising at all in light of the fact that there simply was no secularism in those days. So, we are still not entirely sure why then these writings are so different.

But perhaps one of the reasons why we can explain this is that in the Old Testament as a whole, and in those books in particular, there is an earthiness and an interest culturally, imaginatively, philosophically, religiously, theologically, in all aspects of human life. All experience of human life, the workplace, human sexuality, relationships, economics, business, agriculture, interaction with animals, observation of the world, and scientific engagement at the level that was possible at that time. All of this appears in these texts to a higher degree than in other biblical texts.

Now, perhaps the reason why this happened is just coincidental because we have occasional types of writing then and now. There are some people in the modern world who are scientists, who almost exclusively are interested in physics, biology, in mathematics. There are other kinds of scholars in the modern world who are more interested in the humanities.

There are specialists in geography, there are specialists in language study, there are specialists in historical study, there are specialists in theological study. Just because I happen to mainly write in the humanities, that does not mean that I don't know anything about scientific issues. But in my interest in what I publish, I focus on one particular aspect of a much broader experience of life that I have, and this, I'm sure, I think, would have been true for the ancient writers too.

So, what we have then here in these books is a genuine broadening of the theological engagement and contemplation and reflection of the ancient writers of the Bible, not only with the distinctive, key theological aspects of their experience of life and the world but with various broader areas of life experience, culture and so on. So, from this perspective, the problem largely disappears, and what we have is simply something that we can celebrate and that we can integrate theologically into our understanding of these texts. Coming back to William Kynes in particular, who is emerging fast as a very important and influential scholar in this area, the proposal now is really to engage the biblical texts under consideration, including the Book of Proverbs in particular, not so much as so different from everything else, but to be a genuinely special contribution to the broader picture.

There are various ways in which these texts can be considered, and one way of considering them is to say not, oh, they are wisdom literature, and they are therefore different from everything else, but rather to say they are poetic literature that is



interested in particular aspects of the broader spectrum of human life. This really brings lecture 13 to a close. Thank you for listening to Wisdom Literature.