

Proverbs: International Dimension of Biblical Wisdom Literature

Author: Dr. Knut Heim | Session 13

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Proverbs, Wisdom Literature, International Dimension, Amenemope, Monotheism, Genre Criticism, Gerhard von Rad, William Kynes

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Knut Heim explores the international dimension of biblical wisdom literature, focusing on the historical and theological connections between the Book of Proverbs and ancient Near Eastern texts, particularly the Egyptian Teachings of Amenemope. He addresses historical scholarly concerns regarding divine inspiration and uniqueness, arguing through a modern hermeneutical lens that biblical authors under divine guidance creatively adapted the best of human and cross-cultural insights. Additionally, Dr. Heim traces the 20th-century origins of classifying Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job as "wisdom literature" and reviews recent 21st-century scholarly critiques by Mark Sneed and William Kynes that challenge rigid genre boundaries and anachronistic views of ancient secularism. Ultimately, he highlights wisdom literature as an earthy, practical engagement with all facets of human life within Israel's faith tradition.

Outline

I. Introduction to the International Dimension of Wisdom Literature

A. Overview of Wisdom Literature

1. Primary texts: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Songs
2. Context of Lecture 13: Exploring international parallels and genre designation

B. Historical Context of Biblical Research

1. Discovery of Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) texts in 18th and 19th centuries
2. Key documentation collections:
 - a. James Pritchard's Ancient Near Eastern Texts (ANET)
 - b. William Hallo's The Context of Scripture (COS)

C. Theological Questions Regarding Uniqueness

1. Norman Snaith's The Distinctiveness of the Old Testament

2. Traditional Israelite distinctives (Monotheism, Patriarchs, Exodus, Sinai)
3. Absence of core historical narratives (Exodus, Temple, Torah) in Wisdom Literature

II. Biblical Proverbs and the Egyptian Teachings of Amenemope

A. Archaeological Discoveries

1. E. A. Wallis Budge (1922): Publication of the Teachings of Amenemope
2. Adolf Erman (1924): Discovery of parallel verses between Amenemope and Proverbs (Proverbs 22–24)

B. Debates Over Direct Influence and Inspiration

1. Early defensive arguments claiming biblical priority over Egyptian text
2. Contemporary scholarly consensus: Proverbs creatively reused earlier Amenemope text (dating several centuries earlier)

C. Hermeneutical and Theological Re-evaluation

1. Uncoupling divine inspiration from absolute literary uniqueness
2. Postmodern and modern perspective: Value does not depend on total novelty
3. Human authors, guided by the Holy Spirit, incorporating the best cross-cultural philosophical and moral insights

III. The History and Development of "Wisdom Literature" as a Genre

A. Origins of the Genre Designation

1. 20th-century academic coining of the term "Wisdom Literature"
2. Pre-20th century categorizations:
 - a. Christian tradition: Grouped with poetic books (Psalms)
 - b. Jewish tradition: Grouped within the Writings (Ketuvim)
3. Hermann Gunkel and Form/Genre Criticism (Gattungsforschung)

B. Application to Ancient Near Eastern Texts

1. Extension of biblical genre label to ANE materials
2. W. G. Lambert's Babylonian Wisdom Literature (1960)

C. 20th-Century Scholarly Resurgence

1. Neglect in mid-20th century Old Testament theologies (e.g., Gerhard von Rad's brief early treatment)
2. Gerhard von Rad's Wisdom in Israel (1970 English translation) sparks renewed interest
3. Major 20th/21st-century scholarly commentaries (Bruce Waltke, Michael Fox)

IV. 21st-Century Critiques and Re-evaluations of Wisdom Literature

A. Questioning the Genre Construct

1. Recent work by Mark Sneed and William Kynes
2. Recognition of "Wisdom Literature" as a modern, potentially artificial construct

B. Refuting Anachronistic Views of "Secularism"

1. Critique of earlier hypotheses (e.g., William McKane) alleging a "secular" court intelligentsia
2. Definition of secularism as a modern, Western historical "glitch" (post-Enlightenment/post-1918)
3. Imposition of Western intellectual ideals onto ancient Near Eastern authors

C. Re-integrating Wisdom into Israelite Faith and Practical Life

1. Acknowledging authors' deep religious commitment and integration in Israelite culture
2. Focus on "earthiness": practical engagement with daily life, work, creation, economics, and relationships
3. Re-framing Proverbs and related books as poetic literature addressing the full spectrum of human experience