

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Session 13,

International Dimensions of Biblical Wisdom

6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Hey, welcome. So today we're going to jump into something pretty wild, a discovery that totally shook up biblical scholarship. We're talking about this really unexpected and kind of deep connection between the Bible's book of Proverbs and an ancient Egyptian text that's actually way, way older.

So let's just cut right to the chase with the big provocative question: Was a part of the Bible literally copied from an older pagan text? You can imagine, for a lot of people, this question felt like a direct hit on the Bible's authority. And here's the evidence at the heart of it all. So back in 1924, a German Egyptologist named Adolf Ehrman was studying this Egyptian text, right? It's called the teachings of Amenemope.

And as he's reading, he notices something that must have just blown his mind. He finds more than a dozen verses that are almost word for word the same as verses in the book of Proverbs. But here's the kicker.

The Egyptian text was centuries older. So naturally, the question became, who copied whom? Now, this discovery didn't just stay in some dusty academic journal. It actually sparked a genuine crisis.

I mean, if the Bible just borrowed its material, what makes it unique? What makes it a divine revelation at all? This right here, this was the absolute core of the problem. You see, scholars at the time, guys like Norman Snaith, had pretty much built their entire case for the Old Testament on its distinctiveness. The argument was that its total uniqueness was the proof of its divine origin.

And suddenly, this discovery just seemed to yank that whole foundation right out from under them. So what were these distinct themes they were always talking about? Well, you know them. They're the big, epic stories of Israel's history.

The patriarchs like Abraham, the incredible escape from Egypt in the Exodus, the central role of the temple, and of course, the law of Moses. But here's the thing. Books like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes barely ever mention any of that stuff.

They just felt different. So how did they solve this crisis? Well, over time, the thinking shifted. Scholars started to move away from this idea of a copycat problem and began to see it as a process of, well, creative and inspired adaptation.

Today, the debate is pretty much over. The evidence points overwhelmingly in one direction. The authors of Proverbs definitely knew about the teachings of Amenemope, and they intentionally wove parts of it into their own work.

The question wasn't if they borrowed anymore, but why and how they did it. And this modern understanding really reframes the whole thing. Theologians like Dr. Knut Heim argue that this wasn't plagiarism; it was curation.

The idea is that the biblical writers, guided by wisdom, were taking the absolute best of human insight available to them, even if it came from other cultures, and then they repurposed it to point to even deeper truths. So far from making the Bible less special, this view actually makes it feel richer. Now this whole discovery leads us down another surprising path.

It turns out the very category we use for these books, wisdom literature, is actually a modern invention. Yep, you heard that right. The original authors and readers of the Bible, they would have never heard of the term wisdom literature.

It was basically made up by academics in the 1900s who were trying to figure out what to do with these books that just didn't seem to fit with all the history and prophecy. And you can kind of see the whole journey of this idea right here. It all kicks off in 1924 with a discovery.

For a long time after that, these books were kind of ignored. Then in the 70s, they became super interesting again. But now, more recently, scholars are asking, wait a minute, did we create an artificial box here? Is this category actually limiting how we understand these texts? All this questioning eventually led to taking a hard look at another popular theory.

The idea that the people who wrote these books were some kind of ancient secular intellectuals, almost totally disconnected from Israel's main religious traditions. This was the old way to explain why Proverbs felt so different. The theory was, hey, these weren't priests or prophets writing this stuff.

They were worldly, well-traveled government officials, part of an international intellectual scene. It was a nice, tidy way to explain all the foreign influence. But there's a huge, glaring problem with that theory, and Dr. Heim just nails it with this quote.

The very idea of a secular person is a modern thing. It's a glitch in the long story of humanity. So the key takeaway here is that calling an ancient writer secular is a classic anachronism.

It's like trying to imagine a Roman senator checking his email. We're forcing our 21st-century ideas onto a world that just didn't think that way. In the ancient Near East, everything was religious.

There was no clean split between sacred and secular life. Okay, so if the authors weren't secular copycats, then who were they? Well, the new understanding is much bigger, and honestly, a whole lot more interesting. It's not that these authors were less religious.

It's that they were applying their faith through a much wider lens. They were completely part of their culture, and they saw God's handiwork not just in the big miracles, but in the day-to-day nitty-gritty details of being human. And their scope was just huge.

They weren't ignoring Israel's faith. They were expanding it to find wisdom in absolutely everything. How you work, human sexuality, your relationships, business deals, farming, just looking at the world around you.

It's a theology that's really earthy and practical and engaged with all of life. Which leaves us with a pretty big final thought. If the writers of Proverbs found divine wisdom by engaging with the best ideas they could find, and by paying close attention to the world right in front of them, what does that mean for us? Where should we be looking for wisdom in our own complex, messy, modern world?