

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Session 13, International Dimensions of Biblical Wisdom Podcast, Audio Overview

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Welcome to our deep dive, and today we're going to be looking at biblical wisdom literature. Ooh, interesting. Yeah, we're going to be focusing specifically on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Solomon, and we're going to be looking for international connections.

Oh, wow. Yeah, so it's fascinating to me, at least, how for so long people thought that the Old Testament was completely unique, but then they started finding all these ancient Near Eastern texts, and you find all these intriguing similarities, especially in those wisdom books. You know, it makes you wonder if these books are even more connected to global ideas than other parts of the Bible.

Exactly. And you know, what really got me thinking was that discovery in 1922 of the Egyptian teachings of Amenemope. Oh, yeah.

Amenemope? Yeah, there are passages that are almost word for word the same as in Proverbs, so like, who was inspired by whom? That's a great question. Most scholars actually think that Amenemope came first. Yeah, maybe even by a few hundred years.

Wow, that's a pretty big revelation. I mean, that means that parts of the Bible might actually have been inspired by this Egyptian text? Right. Does that change how we view the Bible? It really does.

It suggests that the Bible is open to wisdom from other cultures. It also reminds us that while we believe the Bible is divinely inspired, God worked through human authors and sources. Right.

It's a more complex process than we often realize. Yeah. So if parts of Proverbs might be drawing from Amenemope, are there other examples of these international connections in these wisdom books? Oh, we'll definitely get into more specifics later.

But you know, the very fact that we even call this group of texts wisdom literature is interesting in itself. You know, that category didn't really exist until the 20th century. Why is that? Why did it take so long to group these books together? Well, before the 20th century, they were often lumped in with poetry or other writings.

Yeah, it was scholars like Herman Gunkel who started to notice their unique forms and themes. And that's when wisdom literature emerged as a recognized genre. Just goes to show that our understanding of these books is still evolving.

So for centuries, people were reading these books without realizing they formed a distinct category. Right. It makes you wonder what else we might discover about them as time goes on.

Yeah. But I'm curious, what are some of the key themes or characteristics that make these books stand out as wisdom literature? Well, for a while, some scholars believed these books were written by secular people, like court officials, diplomats who were disconnected from Israel's religion. They pointed to the practical, everyday focus of the writing as evidence.

But that seems like a pretty modern way of looking at things, doesn't it? Exactly. The concept of secular as we understand it today just didn't exist back then. Everyone viewed the world through a religious lens.

Right. So trying to label these ancient writers as secular misses the mark. So if they weren't secular, what makes their perspective on wisdom unique? What sets them apart from other parts of the Bible? Maybe the better question is, are they really that different? Okay.

Perhaps these books simply reflect a broader interest in all aspects of life. Work, relationships, nature, the human condition. It might be more about a different focus than a completely different worldview.

It's kind of like today, where we have people who specialize in different fields. Yeah. We have scientists, artists, historians.

Right. Perhaps these writers were the wisdom experts of their time, focusing on that particular aspect of life. That's a great way to put it.

Yeah. Just like we have specialists today, maybe they were the ones exploring those deeper questions about life, meaning, and purpose. But if that's the case, how do we explain some of the more philosophical, even challenging passages in these books? Oh, yeah.

Like, Job wrestles with some pretty heavy questions about suffering and the nature of God. Right. That doesn't exactly sound like your typical self-help manual.

You're right. It's true. These books go beyond just offering practical advice.

Yeah. They grapple with some of the biggest questions humans have ever asked. And that's what makes them so fascinating and relevant, even today.

Okay. Yeah. You're right.

Job definitely pushes us to confront some really uncomfortable truths about life. But I think that's part of what makes these wisdom books so valuable. They don't shy away from the hard questions.

So they're not just about giving us easy answers or quick fixes. They're more about helping us grapple with the complexities of life and faith. Exactly.

And that's why I think it's important to move away from that old idea of these writers being detached, secular figures; scholars like Mark Sned and William Kynes are really challenging

that view. Their research shows that these writers were deeply embedded in their culture and very much engaged with their faith. That makes a lot more sense to me.

Instead of seeing them as outsiders critiquing the system, we should see them as insiders trying to make sense of it. Yes. They were wrestling with their beliefs, exploring them in new and insightful ways.

They weren't afraid to ask tough questions. And they didn't always offer neat and tidy answers. That's a great point.

It reminds us that the Bible isn't just a collection of rules or doctrines. It's a record of people wrestling with their faith, trying to understand God and the world around them. And, you know, that wrestling is something we still do today.

We're still asking those same questions about suffering, justice, and the meaning of life. But if we're moving away from this idea of secular wisdom writers, how do we explain the unique style and content of these books? What sets them apart from other parts of the Bible, like the prophetic writings or the historical narratives? I think it's less about a completely different worldview and more about a different lens, a different way of approaching these big questions. They're looking at human experience, ethics, and the nature of God through a more practical, experiential lens.

Can you give me an example? What do you mean by a different lens? Think about Proverbs. It's full of these short, pithy sayings about everyday life. It's practical, observational, even a bit worldly at times.

You're right. It's less about grand narratives of salvation or divine pronouncements. And more about navigating daily challenges, building character, making wise choices.

Exactly. And that's not to say that those other things aren't important. It's just that the wisdom books bring those everyday concerns to the forefront.

They're really zooming in on the nitty-gritty of human experience. So instead of looking for huge differences between wisdom literature and other types of biblical writing, we should be thinking about how they work together. I think that's a great way to put it.

They offer different perspectives on a shared reality. It's like looking at a tapestry from different angles. You get a richer, more complete picture that way.

This is all so fascinating, but I have to admit I'm still a bit mind-blown by the connection between Proverbs and that Egyptian text, Amenemope. It makes me wonder about the whole concept of inspiration. If God can speak through different cultures and even through texts that aren't part of the Bible, what does that mean for how we understand inspiration? That's a profound question.

And one that I don't think anyone has a definitive answer to. It definitely challenges us to expand our understanding of how God works in the world. If God can use an ancient Egyptian text to inspire parts of the Bible, then God can work through all sorts of unexpected channels.

It makes you wonder where else God might be speaking to us, even today, in ways we might not immediately recognize. What unexpected sources of wisdom might be out there waiting to be discovered? That's a great question to reflect on. It reminds us that God's wisdom isn't confined to one book, culture, or time period.

You know, as we're discussing this, I'm remembering something else from our prep notes that I wanted to ask you about. You mentioned that there are scholars who are questioning the very definition of wisdom literature. Can you tell me more about that? Absolutely.

You know, we've been talking about these books as a distinct category, but there are scholars who are pushing back on that idea. They're asking whether wisdom literature is even a helpful category anymore. Why would they question that? It seems like a pretty well-established category by now.

It is. But they argue that by focusing on wisdom literature as a separate genre, we might be missing some important connections and nuances. They're suggesting that we need to look at these books in a broader context, considering how they relate to other biblical genres and ancient Near Eastern literature as a whole.

So instead of just focusing on what makes these books unique, they're saying we need to think about how they fit into the bigger picture. Exactly. And that could lead to some really interesting new insights about how these books were written, how they were understood by their original audience, and how they continue to speak to us today.

It's like those scholars who realized that a monomyth might have influenced Proverbs. They were looking at those texts in a broader context, and suddenly they saw a connection that no one had noticed before. Right.

And that's why this ongoing debate about the definition of wisdom literature is so exciting. It pushes us to keep asking questions, to keep exploring, and to be open to new ways of understanding these ancient texts. So it's not just about learning a set of facts about these books.

It's about engaging in an ongoing conversation, a quest for understanding that might never truly end. That's a great way to put it. It's a reminder that the search for wisdom is a journey, not a destination.

Yeah, it really highlights the fact that there's always more to learn. And speaking of learning, I've been thinking a lot about something you said earlier. If we acknowledge that God can speak through sources outside the Bible, like a monomyth, how do we know what's true and what's not? How do we navigate a world where wisdom seems to be coming at us from all directions? That's such a crucial question, especially in our information-saturated world.

It's not about blindly accepting everything we hear. It's about engaging with different perspectives thoughtfully, testing them against our own understanding of God and the world. We need to be discerning and also open.

Yeah, so it's a balance between holding on to our core beliefs and being open to new insights. Exactly. It's about recognizing that God's wisdom can pop up in the most

unexpected places, but we also have a responsibility to be good stewards of that wisdom, to use it to build a more just and compassionate world.

I love that. It's a reminder that wisdom isn't just about acquiring knowledge. It's about applying it in a way that makes a difference.

Absolutely. And that's one of the things I find so inspiring about these wisdom books. They don't just offer abstract ideas.

They challenge us to live out our wisdom in concrete ways. This has been such an eye-opening conversation. I feel like I have a whole new appreciation for these books and how they fit into the big picture of the Bible.

They're not just collections of sayings or philosophical musings. They're a testament to the human search for meaning and purpose, a search that transcends time and culture. You know, as you were speaking, I was thinking about how even with all the scholarly debate involving interpretations, at their core, these books are still about those fundamental human questions.

They remind us that wisdom isn't something we acquire and then possess. It's a lifelong pursuit. I think that's a perfect note to end on.

These books are an invitation to keep searching, keep questioning, keep exploring. And for our listeners out there, I'd like to leave you with this. If God can speak through ancient Egyptian texts, through the ups and downs of daily life, through the beauty and complexity of the natural world, where else might God be speaking to you? What unexpected sources of wisdom are waiting to be discovered in your own life? Thanks for joining us on this deep dive.