

# THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART I

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERALL THEMES

I. The Book of Wisdom concludes the wisdom literature of the Old Testament with a call to pursue the wisdom of God as against injustice and idolatry.

A. The Book was written after 200 B.C., for it quotes the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was composed in Egypt about 200 B.C. and was later widely used, especially by the New Testament authors.

1. Given that the book does not seem to reflect specifically messianic expectations (although it does refer to the time of visitation, see Wisdom 3:7, 13) that were common in the days of Christ, it is very unlikely to have been written before Christ was born.

2. On the other hand, it does use Greek thought, including the reference to the four cardinal virtues listed by Aristotle, see Wisdom 8:7, and such terms as "the Author of beauty", see Wisdom 13:3, and "the formless matter" of the universe, see Wisdom 11:7. These references would be more likely in the first century before Christ than in the century before that.

3. The most common dating for the time of composition is in the latter half of the first century B.C. because that is when Jewish contacts with the Hellenistic world in Egypt, which is the most likely place of composition, were at a height. See, e.g., Addison Wright, *The Book of Wisdom*, New Jerome Biblical Commentary 510 (1990); "Introduction to the Book of Wisdom", *Wisdom Books in Navarre Bible Series* 302 (2004); John Rybolt, *Wisdom in the Collegeville Bible Commentary Series* 6 (1980); but see "The Book of Wisdom" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (2007) (arguing that dating is very difficult for the book.)

B. Given the fact that the book refers heavily to the Exodus and describes at great length how God was calling even the Egyptian people to repentance, and given the relative paucity of reference to other peoples, it seems most likely that the book was written in Egypt. In particular, there was a large Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt, which makes it the most likely place for composition.

- Both the Greek language that the book seems to have been originally written in and the near absence of references to the

rites of the Jews or the Temple worship (except in 9:8); it is very unlikely that the book was written near or in the Holy Land.

C. The Book of Wisdom was most likely written originally in Greek, but by a Jewish author who had Hebrew styles in mind. There have been some arguments that there was an original Hebrew version of this book that has since been lost. However, most commentators are of the view that the book was originally written in Greek. That is one reason why the Jewish Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D. rejected the book as a part of the Jewish canon. The Protestant denominations, following the Jewish canon, likewise do not consider this book to be inspired.

D. The Book of Wisdom is an attempt to take what is good in Hellenistic thought, and most especially the dedication to wisdom, the belief in the universality of God's call and moral law, and a life after death, but defend them in the context of the Jewish belief in the all powerful and loving personal God, who guides human history. The book opposes both polytheistic worship and the cynical view that there is no justice or point in worshipping at all.

E. The author of the Book of Wisdom is unknown, but appears to have been a well educated Hellenistic Jewish scholar (or scholars) in or around Alexandria.

- Some have argued that Philo, the great Jewish philosopher who lived from 20 B.C. to 54 A.D., was the author. However, while there are similarities between his thought and that of the Book of Wisdom, his writings do not refer to this book, nor does this book refer to his writings. In addition, Philo interpreted Hebrew Scriptures in a heavily allegorical fashion, which this book does not. Thus, it appears more likely that the same currents of thought affected both Philo and the Book of Wisdom.

II. Overall, the Book of Wisdom is generally seen as having three main parts.

A. The first section, which covers chapters 1-5 and the first 21 verses of chapter 2, is a call to seek justice and the description of the rewards for doing so.

1. This section describes wisdom as entering the heart of the just and pure, and the folly of those who see no connection between justice and destiny.

2. Starting in chapter 3, this section plainly describes the reward of the just after this life, and in the future time of visitation.

- For most of Jewish thought until the second century B.C., the notion of immortality was very vague. There were a few passages that seem to refer to a reward for the just and punishment of the unjust after this life. See, e.g., Ps. 49:16, 73:23-24; Is. 26:19; Dan. 12:2-3. But for the most part, the matter was uncertain. See, e.g., Eccl. 3:16-22.

- Likewise, at the time of Christ, the matter of whether the dead would be raised was heavily debated. See, e.g., Luke 20:27-40.

- Throughout most of the Old Testament, the reward of the just was in descendants who would carry on one's heritage, one's reputation, the prosperity of the nation, and the sense of timelessness from worship. See John McKenzie, "Aspects of Old Testament Thought" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990) 1285-86.

- Without denying any of these benefits, the Book of Wisdom, as the Book of Daniel and chapter 7 of the Second Book of Maccabees, describes the greatest reward as the ability to live and reign in honor and glory forever. See, e.g., Wisdom 3:7-9, 4:20-24, 5:16-20, 6:21.

3. On a similar note, the book addresses the questions raised especially in the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes, as well as such Psalms as 37, 49, and 73, about why the wicked seem to prosper and the just suffer.

- The book describes the struggles of the just as testing and disciplining in preparation for greater glory. See, e.g., Wis. 3:4-6, 15, 4:10-13.

- Likewise, the prosperity and even fruitfulness of the wicked are still under the judgment of death, and will result in dishonor in the end. See, e.g., 3:13-29, 4:4-6, 4:19-5:13, 5:20-23.

4. This part ends with a transitional section, calling upon all, and especially rulers, to seek Wisdom, now presented as a woman who guides one to justice and immortality.

B. The next section then exhorts the reader to pursue wisdom, presenting the attractiveness of wisdom in various capacities.

1. First, as if to encourage the reader that anyone can pursue wisdom, the author describes how eager he is to share wisdom. See Wis. 6:22-25, 7:13.

2. The author then takes on the persona of Solomon, the preeminent example of wisdom in the Old Testament, describing how he is a man like all others, but became great because of his desire for wisdom. See Wis. 7:1-12.

3. In the context of pursuing Wisdom, Solomon sings her praises in different ways.

a. First, he describes how wisdom guides one to the proper understanding of all things.

b. Second, he presents Wisdom as the most pure reflection of God and the closest thing to Him. See Wis. 7:22-30

c. Third, he describes how she leads a man to be noble, virtuous, and honored forever. See Wis. 8:1-16.

4. The author then returns to the theme that Wisdom is a gift from God, and that, without it, all else is worthless. See Wis. 8:17-9:18.

- In this context, the author again describes how wisdom is the controlling principle of creation and of worship. See Wis. 9:8-9.

5. The book then gives examples of how it is that Wisdom guided great peoples, from Adam to Moses, up to the time of the Exodus. See Wis. 10:1-11:1. This section thus transitions into the next section, which describes how God's providence is shown throughout history.

C. The third section, which encompasses the last half of the book, uses the Exodus as a case study in how to view history wisely, that is, from the standpoint of God's providence and teaching.

1. From the Jewish standpoint, the Exodus is the central saving event. See, e.g., Hos. 11:1-7. Thus, it makes sense to use this event as the main example.

2. After a brief introduction, this part describes how the plagues sent upon Egypt were fitting punishment for them, but also

calls for the nation to repent as they saw the favor God shows His people.

- Thus, the turning of water into blood is fit punishment for the murder of infants, the plagues of insects fit punishment for worshipping insects and other animals, storms for the refusal to worship the Lord of creation, darkness for those who imprisoned the people meant to be light of the world, the death of the first born for those who killed children.

3. In the midst of these descriptions, there are two long excurses

- The first one, from chapter 11, verse 15 through chapter 12 discusses God's punishments as attempts to bring about repentance and reform among sinners. It insists that God does not want destruction, but improvement and that He allocates punishments accordingly. This notion passage argues that all people are loved by God and that His love is shown even in punishments. Other books had described God's judgment on the nations, see, e.g., Is. 13-23, 28, 33-34, 47; Ezek. 25-29; Amos 1-2. The prophets and psalmists also sometimes described the gathering of nations in the new kingdom. See, e.g., Is. 2:1-4, 56:1-8, 66:28-21; Zech. 14:16-19; Ps. 87. This passage brings together both notions, the punishment and the calling.

- The second excursus, which consists of chapters 13 through 15, describes various ways in which idolatry comes about. It both mocks idolatry as the worship of things weaker than humans, and also describes how people might fall into such folly. The Old Testament had condemned idolatry over and over again. But here there is a psychology of idolatry, meant both to condemn idolatry, but also to make it more understandable how people could fall into it.

4. This section ends with a conclusion describing how God provided for His people in the Exodus, but also brought them to repentance through punishments. God's people are closer to Him than others, but also must experience both His mercy and His justice.

III. Written shortly before the time of Jesus, the Book of Wisdom serves as a bridge to the New Testament.

A. Although there are not clear messianic expectations in the book, this book describes as clear as any in the Old Testament the notion of a life after death and a time of judgment, themes that Jesus and the New Testament writers would elaborate on. The discourses on the merit that comes from suffering also prepares one to understand the merit of Christ's suffering and of all

suffering united with Him.

B. The book still presents Wisdom as created, but also there at the beginning and the ordering principle of all of creation. See Wis. 7:22, 25-26, 9:2-4, 9:9. Thus, while the description of Wisdom here does not directly apply to the Son of God, it prepares the way for an understanding of creation through the Son. See John 1:3-4, 10-11; Heb. 1:3. The New Testament does describe how the humanity of Christ is the controlling principle of creation. See Col. 1:15—20. In this sense Wisdom reflects Jesus.

C. Likewise, God sends this pure spirit of Wisdom to inspire the hearts of His beloved to know all things and to be virtuous and filled with joy. See Wis. 7:22-30, 8:2-8, 21, 9:4-18. In this fashion, this book prepares the way for understanding the sending of the Spirit to inspire God's faithful people.

D. The notion that God loves all peoples and seeks their repentance, not destruction prepares the way for Jesus' universal mission.

E. The letter to the Romans picks up on the Book of Wisdom's themes about both natural wisdom and the failure of those who stayed at the level of nature. See Wis. 13:1-9; Rom. 1:18-23. Romans likewise continues on the theme that idolatry leads directly to sin. See Wis. 14:22-31; Rom. 1:24-31. In Romans and Ephesians, St. Paul also draws upon the idea of using the armor and weapons of faith. See Wis. 5:17-20; Rom. 13:12; Eph. 6:13-17.

F. Overall, the book balances the unity and mysterious holiness of the Wisdom of God with her universality and accessibility. It presents: (1) the call exclusive faith in the God of Israel and His special providence for the Chosen People; and (2) the mystery and glory of the Wisdom that comes from God and reflects His glory; but also presenting (3) God's love for all peoples; and (4) the usefulness of concepts drawn from the Hellenistic world and creation to describe Wisdom and make her accessible to all the world. Thus, the book prepares the way for a Church that is one, holy, Catholic (that is universal) and apostolic (i.e., sent out to all the world.)