

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – SECTION X

THE PRAISE OF WISDOM

(CHAPTER 7, VERSE 13 CHAPTER 8, VERSE 1)

I. In verses 13 to 22 of chapter 7, Solomon expresses his love of wisdom and desire to share her.

A. The passage begins with describing Wisdom as a great and glorious treasure, one acquired in simplicity of heart and shared with generosity.

1. There is again the paradox that Wisdom is immensely valuable, yet available to all, if people would only learn to seek her.
2. The price paradoxically enough is a simplicity or guilelessness needed to be honest with her and God. See Matt 18:1-4; Mark 10:13-16; John 2:47.
3. Unlike worldly wealth, Wisdom is not a limited commodity, either in time or space, and in fact grows with the sharing. Jesus would elaborate on this theme often, saying how the kingdom of God is an unfailing treasure obtainable for the asking, as opposed to the transient wealth of this world. See, e.g., Matt 6:19-21; Luke 12:22-34, 18:24-30; see also 1 John 2:15-17.
4. The treasure can do what no earthly treasure can do, gain one friendship with God.
 - In the Old Testament, only Abraham had been called a friend of God. See 2 Chron. 20:7, Is. 41:8; see also James 2:23. In addition, Adam and Eve apparently conversed with God, Enoch and Noah "walked with God," see Gen. 3:8-19, 5:24, 6:9, and Moses spoke to God "face to face," see Ex. 33:1, Duet. 34:10. But not until here is there any offer that all the just can be friends of God. Jesus would pick up on this theme, promising that through Him, we become friends of God, if we do His will. See John 15:14-17; cf. Matt. 12:46-49.
5. But also, lest there be a false idea of friendship being mere pleasantness or ease, Solomon adds that it is discipline that

commends us to God.

- There is a contrast with friendship with the world or the world and friendship with God. See James 4:4; 1 John 2:15. Discipline gets us away from lesser things to be friends of God.

B. Solomon then prays that he be able to speak in a manner worthy of Wisdom.

1. Wisdom is so exalted that, without the help of her maker, human language would be inadequate. Cf. Vatican II Council, Dei Verbum 13

- With Scripture in general, God inspired the authors not only with the ideas to express, but also guided them in the way to express these ideas, although always with their own efforts.

2. The author does distinguish between Wisdom and God, although indicating that the two are connected. The prayer for rightful words is to God, rather than to Wisdom.

- As God is the guide of Wisdom, so too He is the guide to all who are wise. One could see it in the other direction, i.e., that those who are wise have God as their guide, as opposed to lesser things.

3. Solomon thus recognizes that language and all skills are in the hands of God.

- The hand of God is a common Biblical image representing God's sovereignty and saving power. See Ex. 13:3; Job 12:9-10; Ps. 31:15, 44:4, 139:10; Sir. 10:5; Mk. 6:2; 1 Pet. 5:6. The hand of God is also a symbol of the punishments of God. See Job 19:21; Heb. 10:31. Here the author, because he is a servant of God through Wisdom, is confident in the hands of God.

C. Solomon then celebrates how Wisdom is the source and controlling principle of all knowledge, not only of divine, but also of created things.

1. Solomon's wisdom, in understanding both humans and the things of nature, such as plants and animals, was legendary.

See 1 Kings 4:16-28, 5:9-14.

2. This passage elaborates on this theme, indicating that such wisdom is available to all peoples who will pursue her.

3. The passage describes both the overall vision of created things and judgment about specific things based upon experience. The two realms were not clearly distinct in the Jewish mind. See Pope John Paul II, *Rides et Ratio* 14.

- St. Thomas Aquinas describes the gift of the Holy Spirit called knowledge (*scientia*) as the ability to draw rightful conclusions about created things and their value in the light of faith, combined with reason. See *Summa Theologica* II-II q. 9 art. 1-3. The element of faith leads to a certainty not available to conclusion based upon ordinary observations.

- The field of science (called in a bygone era natural philosophy) makes judgments about natural things from experience, testing and natural reason. Even here, the assumption that the world is orderly, that our senses do not deceive us, and that the laws of nature are consistent in time and space is dependant upon the assumption of an orderly Creator (here working through Wisdom.) Without that assumption, the basis for science itself fails. See C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* ch. 3 (1947). It is possible that Solomon, precisely because he believed in an orderly Creator, whereas the pagans around him did not, was inclined to discover laws of nature that others did not bother to seek, believing the world to be under the guidance of chaotic gods.

- Social sciences and philosophy likewise make judgments about human beings in the light of experience and reason.

- Wisdom literature does not see a radical severance between science, philosophy and faith. Although each field has its own dignity, all in the end come back to God. Cf. Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes* 36; Catechism of the Catholic Church 2293.

- This passage indicates that Divine Wisdom was guiding Solomon, and thus by extension, can guide all the devout in all of these ways. Wisdom helps understand natural things better, and likewise leads us to appreciate how natural things reflect the hand of God. See, e.g., Ps. 19:1-7, 29:3-11.

4. Verses 17-20 thus describes in various ways the knowledge of created things that Wisdom imparts.

- It begins with the basic principles, what exists, the structure of the world and the basic elements. These matters were at the core of ancient philosophy and still are at the basis of science.
- It then proceeds to matters of time, how things begin, progress and end.
- The passage then describes the knowledge of the heavens, with the times of the earth and the constellations of the stars.
- It then goes on to knowledge of the things of this world, of animals and plants, which surround humans.

5. The passage concludes in verses 21 and 22 with the overall idea that, because Wisdom fashioned all things, it is her that teaches about things best, whether they are manifest (as with the things of this world) or more secret (as with the spirits of human thought, or with divine things.)

- Proverbs 8:22-31 had elaborated on how Wisdom was there at the beginning and thus gives, and alone can give, guidance on how to live in the ways of God
- With Wisdom, what is secret is made manifest and what is manifest is truly understood.

II. The book then turns to the praise of Wisdom at the center of his discourse.

A. This praise begins with describing Wisdom as having a spirit, whom the author describes in terms of 21 attributes, apparently organized into seven groups of three.

1. Seven was the symbol of perfection, as with the days of creation. Repeating something three times was the Jewish way of expressing the superlative. Thus the image is the height of perfection.

- The author also says he is describing the spirit that Wisdom has, not even quite Wisdom in herself. The idea may be that Wisdom herself, like the eternal law of God, cannot be described by human language.

2. The first three elements are the intelligence, holiness, and uniqueness of the spirit of Wisdom.

- Intelligence is that ability to perceive the nature of things, beyond experience. Most of the time, we arrive at intelligence through experience, but Wisdom, like the angels, knows things immediately.

- Holiness is that closeness to God, set aside only for Him.

- Wisdom is uniquely close to God and perceiving of all things, even above the angels.

3. The next three attributes are that the spirit of Wisdom is manifold, subtle and agile.

- There is a paradox here of Wisdom being at the same time clear to all, and yet having a subtlety that makes her the subject of great investigations.

- She is agile, making herself known to those worthy of her, yet hidden to others.

4. The next three attributes are that the spirit of Wisdom is clear, unstained, and certain, or definite.

- Unlike the muddled things of this world, which are a mixture of good and evil, see Rom. 8:19-23, Wisdom is in a pure realm above and thus guides people to see clearly without the ambiguity of this world. Cf. 1 Cor. 13:12-13.

- Purity, which is needed to be with wisdom, leads to that certainty of the vision of God. See Ps. 24:4-5, Matt. 5:8.

5. The next three attributes are that the spirit of Wisdom is not baneful (or is invulnerable), loves the good and is keen.

- Wisdom is immortal and therefore not subject to death or deadly to others. Again there is a contrast with the

passing things of this world, which are subject to death.

- In her immortal vision, she sees and loves all the good. This love connects wisdom to love (caritas in Latin, agape is Greek), which St. Paul celebrates in 1 Corinthians 12.

- But Wisdom also challenges her children by her keenness. Nothing can be hidden from her. Cf. Heb. 4:12-14. Her love does not make her lax, but rather guides her children through discipline to the immortal realms. See Prov. 1:1-7; Wis. 1:5.

6. The next three attributes are that the Spirit of Wisdom is unhampered (or irresistible), benevolent and kindly.

- Wisdom combines the power of God with the kind, benevolent guidance of a good queen.

- One gets the impression of a noble queen of loyal subjects, who rules by her gentle guidance. See Prov. 9:1-6; Sir. 24:13-21 (describing Wisdom more as the kingdom itself); James 3:17.

7. The next three attributes are that the spirit of Wisdom is firm, secure, and tranquil.

- One has the image of a peaceful kingdom in the midst of this troubled, often chaotic world. This image is a common one in Scripture. See, e.g., Is. 9:1-6, 65:21-25; Ez. 37:23-28; Amos 9:13-15; Micah 4:1-8; Rev. 21:9-22:5.

- The implication is that one who dwells in Wisdom will likewise be secure against the travails of the world. See, e.g., Prov. 10:25; Ps. 125:1-2; Matt. 7:24-27.

8. The final three attributes summarizing the spirit of Wisdom as all powerful, all seeing, and pervading all spirits.

- There is a sense of the completeness of Wisdom governing and knowing all things.

- Expressing that there is nothing above Wisdom, the author says that she pervades even the highest of spirits, which are, as she was described at the beginning of the passage, intelligent, pure and subtle.

- Part of the idea, therefore, is that there is no point in seeking any lasting power, knowledge or access to the spiritual realm without Wisdom.

B. The passage then describes the effects and glory of Wisdom.

1. There again appears to be a chiasmic structure to this praise of Wisdom.

a. Verse 24 of chapter 7 and verse 1 of chapter 8 are at the beginning and end of the praise, describing how Wisdom is the controlling principle of all things, guiding them perfectly.

b. Verses 25 and 26 describe the glory of Wisdom as perfectly reflecting God, and are complemented by verses 28 and 29, which describes how Wisdom is greater than any light because she is permanent and prevails over any darkness, and especially the darkness of evil.

c. The first half of verse 27 describes how Wisdom is all powerful and renews all things, while verse 28 describes how all things that God loves, He loves in Wisdom.

d. The climax in the second half of verse 27 describes how Wisdom produces holy souls and friends of God and prophets. The implication is that we become holy, friends of God and prophetic through the pursuit of Wisdom.

2. The prologue of the Gospel according to John has a similar structure centering on the theme that those who accept the Word become adopted children of God. See John 1:1-18.

3. Verse 24 describes Wisdom as more subtle and pervasive than even motion. The idea is that there is an activity, a motion, an energy of which all of the activity of this earth is but an image. And that action is comes from Wisdom.

- The purity, the perfection of Wisdom allows her to act with this pure spiritual activity that is deeper and stronger than any of the sullied actions of this earth.

- There were a number of rites in the Levitical code that would reflect the purity needed to be among the people of God. See, e.g., Lev. 14:22-32, 15:1-33, Num. 8:5-22; 31:19-24. As the letter to the Hebrews points out,

however, these rites were only symbols of the purity that Jesus won for us by His cross. See Heb. 10:1-18. This purity allows us to enter into Wisdom and therefore draw close to God.

4. Verses 25 and 26 describe the five images for how Wisdom reflects God, with the necessary implication that there is nothing unsullied in her in the midst of them.

a. She is the aura (or breath) of the might of God. We cannot be in the fullness of God's glory now, for we could not tolerate it. But Wisdom allows us to sense His glory and majesty.

b. Likewise, the glory of God glows upon us through Wisdom. On Mount Sinai, His glory showed in thunder, lightning, earthquake, fire, and smoke; and none but Moses and Joshua could approach. See Ex. 19:16-25. But through Wisdom we can be in that presence of the glory of God. Cf. Heb. 11:18-24.

- Nothing unclean can be in that glorious presence. Thus, the final and glorious kingdom of God cannot admit the unclean. See Ps. 15; Is. 25:8-9, 52:1; Zech. 13:2; Rev. 21:25

c. The light of God, which reflects life and glory is perfectly reflected in Wisdom. This light reflects God's guidance and His providence making people enjoy His favor and truth. See, e.g., Is. 9:1-4; Jesus, especially as recorded in the Gospel according to John, focuses on how He brings this light into the world. See John 1:4-9, 8:12, 9:4-5.

d. Wisdom also reflects perfectly the power of God, as opposed to the imperfect reflection that occurs in the midst of this sullied world. Jesus promises that those who act in His name, fully in union with Him, will share in that perfect power. See, e.g., Matt. 18:19-20; John 15:7, 16.

e. Wisdom also is that perfect image of God's goodness. Here, we see in images and clouds, but in Wisdom we begin to sense, and one day in heaven will see, the goodness of God in Himself. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 3:2.

5. The first half of verse 27 then describes how Wisdom does all things and renews all of creation. The prophets spoke of the renewal of the earth, see, e.g., Is. 65:17, 66:22; Joel 3:1-4:18; Hag. 2:6-9; Zech. 9:9-10:12; Rev. 21:1, and here the book describes Wisdom as continually bringing this renewal about, but herself the stable constant. See Ps. 102:25-29;

6. Central to the passage is the fact that, in the context of this glory of Wisdom, she comes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets.

- The idea seems to be that the people are already holy, and Wisdom makes them greater, to be friends of God and prophets. As the passages regarding the humble birth of Solomon indicate, it is not as though Wisdom makes souls friends of God and prophets from before birth. See Wis. 7:1-6. Rather, it is those who pursue holiness that then also are elevated by Wisdom.
- The people of God were called to be holy, see Ex. 19:6; Duet. 7:1-6, and the author says that this pursuit will make one through Wisdom a friend of God and sharing in prophesy.
- Verse 14 had already promised that Wisdom would make her followers friends of God. This passage indicates that we can also share in prophesy through Wisdom. Moses had long earlier expressed a wish that all the people of God were prophets. See Num. 11:29. Joel had prophesied that one day this wish would be fulfilled. See Joel 3:1-3. And here the Book of Wisdom says Wisdom will achieve this goal, which later becomes fully manifest at Pentecost. See Acts 2:14-39.

7. The passage then goes on to say that there is no other way to God's favor than through Wisdom. Earlier the passage had said that Wisdom renews all things, thus making them fit for God. Now it says further that Wisdom is the only way to find favor with God.

- Jesus is finally expressed as the only way to salvation. See, e.g., John 14:6; Acts 4:12. One can see the combination of these two ideas as either that Wisdom leads one to Jesus, who alone saves, or that only in Jesus and through the salvation He won can anyone be pure enough to live with the saving Wisdom of God.

8. The author then goes on to praise Wisdom again as greater than even the greatest lights we know, the sun and the stars.

- The sun and the stars give an image of permanent light above the travails of the earth. See Ps. 19:1-7, 148:1-6. They are considered by the psalmist to be vastly greater than this earth, and gave him a sense of humility before

God, although also a sense of thanksgiving. Ps. 8:4, 144:3.

- Here, the book of Wisdom says that even they do not shine on earth always, whereas Wisdom does.
- Jesus, reflecting the Isaiah, Jeremiah and Joel, takes the image of the impermanence of the sun and the stars further, saying that at the end of all things on earth, even their light will fail. See, e.g., Is. 13:10; Ez. 32:7, Joel 2:10, 3:3-5; Matt. 24:29-31; Mark 13:24
- The image becomes even more powerful in the light of these prophecies, indicating that when all else fails, Wisdom endure forever; and thus those who are walk with her advance on into a permanent realm. Wickedness, i.e. the moral darkness of humans and fallen angels, cannot prevail against her.

9. The passage then concludes with the image of the wise governance of Wisdom making all things harmonious in her.

- The book of Revelation likewise portrays the great woman clothed with the sun with the stars at her feet (an image of Mary or the Church) brining forth her child, Jesus, to rule all nations, and guiding her children, the faithful ones, from the attacks of the devil. See Rev. 12.