

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART XI

WISDOM AS THE GENEROUS LADY

I. Solomon now describes Wisdom as a beautiful woman and the bride of his soul, who provides all things that are of lasting goodness.

A. Continuing a theme introduced in chapter 6, Solomon develops the image of wisdom as a bride. The image of Wisdom as a wonderful and queenly woman was also developed in Proverbs 1:20-33 and 8:1-9:12; see also Bar. 3:9-4:3. But there the image is more of Wisdom as a matron inviting people to be her children and reside in her glorious house. Here, the call is to love her as a bride. At an earlier, or about the same, time, Sirach combined both images. See Sir. 15:1-10.

- This image is a complement to the idea that the Chosen People were the bride of God. See, e.g., Is. 54:1-10, 62:1-5; Hos. 1;1-3:5.

- On a related note, Jesus would employ the image of marriage in taking the Church as His bride. See, e.g., Matt. 9:14-15; Mark 2:19-20; Eph. 5:21-33; Rev. 21:2, 9-10.

B. Building upon the description of the advantages of Wisdom listed in chapter 7, Solomon now describes the physical, intellectual and spiritual glories of Wisdom.

1. First, there is the controlling principle that Wisdom, because she is close to God, brings people into companionship with God. See also Wis. 7:14, 27. That friendship with God, which Jesus spoke of to His disciples at the Last Supper, is the highest of the blessings, an almost unimaginable privilege if one really understands the glory of God. See John 15:15-17.

- The passage describes Wisdom as working with God in all things and knowing all of God's plans. The Greek term for companionship (symbiosis) that the book uses usually refers to marriages. The implication can be that Wisdom is in a sense the bride of God. There could also be the implication that Wisdom is the daughter of God and that, by taking her as the bride, Solomon is in a sense becoming the son in law of God.

2. Then, building upon the description of Wisdom as an unfailing treasure in chapter 7, verse 14, Solomon now reasons that, if one values treasure, one should seek Wisdom above all else, for she is the source of all good things.

- It may seem that Solomon is appealing to a rather basic desire, rather than the more elevated desires for knowledge, virtue, and companionship with God as he does elsewhere. But he must relate to people where they are, and here he relates to a common desire and seeks to elevate it. The desire for wealth is not itself wrong, see, e.g., Is. 45:14, 60:5-6, 11; Ps. 128:1; Prov. 3:16, 10:22, but rather the excessive desire for it, or the use of it wrongly or selfishly. See, e.g., Matt. 6:19-21; Luke 16:19-31; James 5:1-6; 1 Tim. 6:9-10. Wealth can be a barrier to entering the kingdom of God, see Mark 10:17-31, and people may be called to give it up in life as they will at death. Thus, the moderate desire for treasure is not wrong, but must be kept in check and understood in the context that all things are in the end owed back to God. See Catechism 2402; Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes* 69, 71; Pope John Paul II, *Centissimus Annus* 30 (1991)

- Solomon thus appeals to a natural desire and seeks to elevate it to a supernatural level, portraying one as able in a sense to own all treasures if one has wisdom. Jesus builds upon this message saying that those who give up family or wealth will receive many more times it, even in this life, with persecutions, and then receive eternal life. See Mark. 10:29-31; cf. Wis. 8:18-21; Matt. 6:33; Rev. 3:18

3. Then, drawing a conclusion from the promise in chapter 7, verse 16 that Wisdom provides prudence and knowledge of all crafts, Solomon now says that if one desires prudence or understanding, one should certainly seek her above all else, for she fashioned all things.

- The author may be responding to the common criticism that this pursuit of Wisdom is abstract and a distraction from more pressing, practical affairs. He argues that, to the contrary, she gives the controlling principles and guide of all practical things.

4. Building on the idea of how Wisdom is useful, Solomon then speaks of how Wisdom gives her disciples all of the central (sometimes now called cardinal) virtues that Greek philosophy praised: justice, fortitude, prudence and temperance.

- Aristotle in Nicomachian Ethics had describes these virtues as the central ones, and Christian philosophy has likewise describes them as the cardinal natural virtues, virtues that anyone, Christian or not can have, virtues that form the core of a good life. See Catechism 1805-1809; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-I q. 61.

- Here, Jewish wisdom is also incorporating these virtues.

- The message is that one cannot simply be virtuous on a natural level. Even for the natural virtues, Wisdom is needed fully to enter into them. See Catechism 1811.

5. Finally, Solomon says that if one wants learning, Wisdom is the controlling principle of all intelligence, knowing all things and all times, from the past to the culmination of all things.

- Chapter 7, verses 17-22, described how Solomon learned all things through Wisdom. He now says that all peoples can have such knowledge with Wisdom.

- Jesus said that, through the parables (like the turns of phrases and riddles of which Solomon speaks), He was revealing what had laid hidden from the foundation of the world, but that only those to whom God wishes to reveal them can understand. See Matt. 12:34-35; Mark 4:10-12. He likewise speaks of the fact that those in the world can judge from the appearances of the sky, but cannot read the signs of the times. See Matt. 16:1-4; Luke 12:54-56. Later, St. Paul describes the mysteries of God that are available to those with understanding, for are accessible through the Cross. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 2:1-7, 13:2, 14:2; Eph. 3:3-10; Col. 2:2.

- There is a notion of a Wisdom hidden from the world, but not because of a jealous guarding of it from the masses, but rather because it is attained only with the discipline that comes from God, which the New Testament will describe as fulfilled in the Cross.

- Wisdom here, like the gift of the Holy Spirit that is called wisdom, is that ability to see all things in the light of God.

II. Solomon then describes, as he did in chapter 7, verses 7-12, how he took Wisdom and how she made him a good ruler.

A. Here, he begins and ends with a description of a peaceful, joyous relationship with Wisdom in his home.

1. Wisdom is helpful in both good times and ill, giving counsel and comfort, as the perfect wife and queen. There is perhaps an ironic contrast with the foreign wives who led Solomon astray when he was old, leading to a division of his

kingdom after his death. See 1 Kings 11:1-13.

2. There is a sense of peace amidst the struggles and turmoil of the world with Wisdom at one's home.

- Jesus will later promise that peace despite, and in fact partially because, of the turmoil of the world. See John 14:27, 16:33; Eph. 2:14-22.

- This final blessing may be an image of the peace of heaven in the house of Wisdom at the end of a life of struggle. That interpretation would bring this passage to a fitting conclusion.

B. Wisdom gives Solomon great capacity for judgment, and thus for admiration from the world.

1. Here, there is a more positive view of the people around Solomon.

- The book has certainly recognized that there are many evil people who do not recognize Wisdom and in fact oppose the wise man. See Wis. 1:16-2:21. Except Jonah, virtually all of the prophets were rejected, to one degree or another by their own people. See Luke 4:24. But even the rejection and anger that was so often directed toward the prophets is a sign that the people could not ignore them as irrelevant, but knew that their words had power.

- Solomon was revered during his day and thus the "they" that give Solomon praise and respect because of his wisdom means, on an historical level, the people and the rulers at the time of Solomon. The lesson for the just in general may be more that, if one seeks Wisdom, one will receive respect: (1) from the general public, but with the understanding that the respect may not be lasting or lead to real conversion; or (2) from the company of the wise, including the angels and saints, the people whose admiration is worth having.

2. Solomon here describes the pleasure of being listened to, people waiting for him to speak, and listening reverently when he does. Putting one's hands over one's mouth is a sign of reverence in the presence of wisdom. See Job 29:9, 40:4.

- As with wealth and the desire for praise, the desire to be heard is not an evil one, and the author is building upon it, encouraging people to seek Wisdom that their words may be worth hearing.

- There is perhaps also a subtle message that one should be silent and reverent in the presence of who is truly wise, listening to him carefully. See Prov. 1:1-9, 3:1-8.

3. Here again the words of Solomon are even more fulfilled in Jesus, whose words were such that the crowds listened to Him with rapt attention, although in many cases without the commitment to let themselves be converted. See, e.g., Matt. 21:46; Mark 12:17, 37; Luke 13:17.

C. The final blessing of Wisdom is the immortality and glory she brings.

1. The immortality is first of all the remembrance people will have of him. Regarding Solomon, the promise is a literal reputation that will last until the end of time. Clearly, not all of the just are remembered on this earth, but there is a notion that their influence and virtue will last forever. See Sir. 42:1-8. The wicked are forgotten or condemned in remembrance, but the just in this fashion live forever.

- But with the understanding of immortality, this promise is now of eternal reputation among the elect. See, e.g., Wis. 3:7; Dan. 12:3.

2. Wisdom also brought great glory and rule over peoples to Solomon. Of course it does not bring such worldly glory to all of the just. And, in fact, Jesus will later warn against seeking such glory. See, e.g., Matt. 18:1-5, 20:25-28; Mark 9:35-37.

- However, there is a promise of great influence even in this world. Christians are called to change the world in a manner that the powers of the world are terrified of and thus try to suppress. See, e.g., Acts 4:5-22, 5:17-42, 7:54-60; cf. Ps. 149.

- Furthermore, as the Book of Wisdom has promised and as Jesus will later promise, the just in heaven will have great authority. See Wis. 3:8; Matt 19:28; Luke 12:44, 19:11-27; cf. Dan. 7:18, 27; 1 Cor. 6:2; Rev. 20:4.

3. The promise is not only of gaining the respect of people, but more important with deserving that respect will capability

and courage.

- It is not surprising that Wisdom leads to being capable, but the passage also says it leads to courage, which is not as obvious.
- Part of the idea may be that that unity with God, and the promise of immortal life, gives one the courage to be holy. See 2 Macc. 7. There is a contrast with the cowardice of those who think that this world and this life is everything and thus cling to safety and pleasure.
- St. Paul will build upon this theme by describing the wisdom of the Cross, which gives us courage, knowing that all righteous suffering on this earth is united with Christ. See 1 Cor. 2:6-16.

III. Solomon then describes his own experience in seeking out Wisdom.

A. He begins by summarizing the benefits of Wisdom that he has just praised.

1. First, he begins with the last blessing, immortality. The idea is that in Wisdom one is brought to a realm beyond death and decay.

- Jesus promises that He will bring us to that realm, for of our own accord we cannot attain it. See, e.g., John 6:40, 50-58, 11:28. Without Him, we are all subject to sin and therefore to death, for we cannot attain those realms of pure wisdom on our own. See, e.g., Rom. 5:12-7:25.
- The Book of Wisdom here describes the Wisdom that gives immortality, but now how to attain to her. That question will be answered in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

2. He then describes the pure delight at being in her company, making immortality worth having. There is a joyfulness in the company of Wisdom, and therefore, in the company of God that is beyond any earthly happiness. It is in this sense that Christians are called to rejoice in the Lord always. See Phil 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16. This delight, this joyfulness in the presence of God is a common theme of the Psalms. See, e.g., Ps. 9:2, 15, 33:1, 21, 68:4-5, 89:13-17, 96:11-12; see also Is. 65:2-

19, 66:10-14; Phil 2:16-18, 3:1-3, 4:4.

3. The next promise is that the work of Wisdom, or work done for her, will last forever.

- Work done in the world creates things of only transient value, for all things of this world eventually pass away. This theme is a frequent one of the Book of Ecclesiastes. See Eccl. 1:2-8, 2:18-23, 4:4-6.

- Wisdom promises the ability to gain by one's work things that will endure, as Jesus will later promise of all things dedicated to the kingdom of heaven. See Matt. 6:19-21; see also Heb. 12:28-29.

4. The next promise is that in keeping her company, and thus listening to her, one will advance in prudence and understanding.

- The idea is that she is the best of teachers, and that one continually advances in knowledge by continually consulting her.

- People will pay attention to those whom they think will benefit them the most. The implication is that, if one really wants to be understanding or capable, one should visit Wisdom regularly.

5. Finally, one gets rightful fame and renown from sharing Wisdom with others.

- As the book has said before, Wisdom is meant to be shared, not hoarded or lorded over others. See Wis. 6:23, 7:13.

- The book is thus calling for a certain evangelization, a call Jesus will build upon as He sends His disciples out to bring His light to the world. See, e.g., Matt. 5:13-16, 28:19-20. See also 1 Peter 2:12, 4:15-16.

B. Knowing these advantages of Wisdom, Solomon decided to seek her, but knew that she could only be granted by God.

1. On the one hand, he does say that he had many advantages from the beginning.

- He was well-favored in having King David as his father and David's favorite wife as his mother.
- He was also presumably blessed by God from even before his conception. Cf. Is. 49:1; Jer. 1:5-6.
- He also says he has physical glory. The passage could mean either: (1) that because God has called him to be a great soul, he gave him a glorious body; or (2) that the purity of his soul in youth led him to be physically pure as well. In theory, the passage could be read in a Hellenistic manner to mean that he had a pre-existing soul that was pure and then given a pure body. But that reading would contradict all Jewish theology. See Fr. Addison Wright, S.S., "Wisdom" 33:28 in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary.

2. But even with physical, mental and spiritual glory, he could not attain Wisdom unless God give her.

- As Solomon will later say in his prayer, no one can gain Wisdom, and thus no one can gain real merit, unless God give her. See Wis. 9:6.
- The notion here is that virtue is needed to advance in Wisdom, but alone is not sufficient. The grace of God is always needed for anyone to attain real merit. See, e.g., Catechism 2006-2011. This notion is notably absent from the great Greek philosophers, who generally believed: (1) that only the chosen few could really attain the heights of wisdom; and (2) attaining her was mainly a matter of merit and effort, with no notion of God (whether the unmoved mover of Aristotle or the perfect form of Plato) granting her in response to a humble petition.
- Thus, this path to Wisdom, and thus to life, joy and glory, is open to all, but only in the context of a humble request and petition. As Jesus would say later, we must enter the kingdom of God as children, and through the cross and the narrow gate. See, e.g., Matt. 5:13-15, 16:24, 18:3-5