

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART XII

SOLOMON'S PRAYER FOR WISDOM

I. Chapter 9 is Solomon's prayer for Wisdom, in which he asks God to give him the wisdom needed for his position, and broadens notion, recognizing that all people need Wisdom.

A. The prayer is an expansion of the prayer for wisdom that the First Book of Kings and the Second Book of Chronicles records at the beginning of Solomon's reign. See 1 Kings 3:6-9; 2 Chron. 1 7:9-10.

- As with those prayers, the prayer recorded here emphasizes that Solomon needs wisdom to govern God's people, a task no one could do without God's special help.

- But in this prayer there is an increased notion of Wisdom as the guiding principle of all creation and as needed by all people.

B. Overall, the prayer in chapter 9 consists of three sections of six verses each.

1. The first section involves a prayer for Wisdom in general.

- a. It begins with a reflection upon the order of creation and man's call to rule creation, describing Wisdom as the organizing principle of this order.

- b. It then follows with a prayer for the sending of Wisdom from heaven.

- c. Then the prayer recognizes that Solomon in particular and all people need Wisdom for any accomplishment.

2. In the second section, Solomon prays for Wisdom specifically for the purpose of ruling over God's people and the building of the Temple.

- a. It again begins with a reflection upon God's actions, but here in appointing Solomon as king over God's people

and the builder of the Temple. Once again Wisdom is there with God knowing all of His plans.

b. Then, as with the first section, there is the prayer that God send forth Wisdom to Solomon that he may carry out his duties.

c. Here, complementing the first section's reflection that, without Wisdom, no one can be worthy, here the prayer concludes that with Wisdom Solomon can rule well.

3. In the third section, the prayer returns to a reflection upon humanity in general need for Wisdom to discern anything divine.

a. The first four verses reflect upon how difficult it is for earthly mortals to think about even complex earthly things, and even more how we are unable to comprehend the things of heaven.

b. The last two verses then give the answer that it is through Wisdom and the Spirit of God that we can be led to understand God's counsel.

C. This prayer thus leads into chapter 10, which begins the description of the workings of Wisdom in history.

- Chapter 10 describes the time up to the Exodus, and then the rest of the Book reflects upon the Exodus and lessons drawn from that event.

- The prayer begun in chapter 9 never really ends, but sets up the structure for the rest of the Book of Wisdom, which is carried on as a long narrative prayer.

II. The first section of the prayer reflects upon the glory of man, but upon our need for Wisdom to live out that glory.

A. The prayer begins by addressing God in four ways.

1. First, he calls upon God as "the God of my fathers." This is perhaps a reflection upon God's promises to the Chosen

People, from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Solomon's direct father, King David, calling upon God to fulfill this long plan of salvation.

- Solomon may be reflecting back upon God's description of Himself to Moses as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," reminding Moses of the promises to those patriarchs. See Ex. 3:15.
- He is also connecting himself to his people's history, recognizing that his call comes in the context of the whole people of God. Cf. Ps. 105:5-6; Micah 7:20; Luke 1:55.

2. Second, he refers to God as the "Lord of mercy." There is a combination of the notion of the majesty of God, but also of His providence and compassion.

- The mercy of God and His majesty and guidance of history is a common theme of the psalms. See, e.g., Ps. 118:1-4, 29, 136: 1-26. Likewise, the angels above the Ark of the Covenant were said to be holding the "seat of mercy" throne of God's glory, combining the ideas of God's power and majesty and His compassion for His people. See Ex. 25.
- Mercy means both the forgiveness of sins, but also the overcoming of all of the effects of evil, whether the recipient is blameworthy or not. See, e.g., Ex. 34:6; Deut. 4:31; Ps. 51:3, 103:8, 145:8; Matt. 18:23-35 (God's mercy as forgiveness); Ps. 67:17; Sir. 2:1-11,; Matt. 9:27-31; Luke 17:11-19. Here mercy is needed both to overcome sins that Solomon in particular and God's people in general may rise, and so that we may overcome the weakness inherent in human nature. See Sir. 18:1-13.

3. Third, the prayer refers to God as creating all things by His word.

- a. The first chapter of Genesis reflects the order, majesty and omnipotence of God creating all things by a mere word. See Gen. 1; cf. Ps. 33:6 1; Sir. 42:15-43:35.
- b. This creative word continues in the voice of prophesy and must have its effect. See. Is. 55:10-11. The creative and often thundering word of God (dabar in Hebrew; logos in Greek) thus compliments the creative and more gentle voice of wisdom.

4. Finally, and most importantly, the section describes how God in Wisdom established man to rule all things.

a. The psalm is reflecting back upon the initial order in which Adam and Eve governed all things before the fall. See Gen. 2. We still have that primordial authority, although it is damaged by sin. See, e.g., Ps. 8:5-9; Sir. 17:1-4.

b. There is a notion here of the natural authority that we have over creation, a glory that God has given us.

c. But with that calling comes a responsibility, to rule with holiness and justice and to judge with integrity. The same virtues needed for a king are needed for all mankind to fill our vocations in the world.

- The holiness is an attribute of God, see, e.g., Ex. 15:11; Is. 6:1-4, and sharing in holiness indicates closeness to Him, as with the Temple and the People of God. See, e.g., Ex. 19:4; Lev. 19:2, 20:3; 1 Kings 8:10-11

- Justice indicates a right relationship between people, the more social aspect of a good society. See, e.g., Duet. 10:18-19; Ps. 10:16-18; Is. 11:1-9.

- Integrity of heart would indicate more internal order purity of life that allows for right judgment and true happiness. See Prov. 19:1, 20:7, 28:6; Sir. 7:6.

B. Knowing the awesome responsibility given to all mankind, Solomon thus prays for God to send His servant Wisdom.

1. Wisdom is described as God's attendant, indicating her glory, but also subordination to God.

- She does seem to be glorious above even the angels, for they veil their faces in God's presence and do His will. Compare Is. 6:1-4; Tob. 12:18 with Prov. 8:22-36.

2. His prayer not to be rejected implies that, without this gift Solomon will falter. There is perhaps an echo of Psalm 89, especially verses 39-49, in which the psalmist laments to defeat of the king. The implication is that the failure and eventual end of the monarchy was not just a stroke of ill fortune that there happened to be a series of bad kings. The idea is that

any ruler, or anyone without the gift of Wisdom will suffer a similar fate. Cf. Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes* 34, 37.

3. The image is that the divine assistant of God will also assist human affairs.

C. Solomon thus recognizes his, and anyone's, need for Wisdom, to do anything worthy of esteem.

1. Even the well-favored Solomon, admits, that he is weak, short-lived and lacking in comprehension.

- He is but a slave of God, not of himself worthy to share in God's plans, but he has been given such a responsibility anyway. The phrase reflects Psalms 86 and 116, the thanksgiving of a man whom God has delivered from a life-threatening distress. See Ps. 86:16, 116:16. The implication is that the very unworthiness of our role is salvation history itself makes us in need of salvation.

- The weakness could be intellectual or moral, but in any case makes one unfit to live out one's vocation. God cures this ill that one may have the strength from heaven. See Is. 30:29-31.

- Being short lived among other things implies that one does not have enough time to learn of the things of God. See Job 4:19. It is the opposite of the just man described in chapter 3 who died young, having grown to perfection in a short time. See Wis. 4:13.

- He thus does not have the time to learn to be a good king, or even enough to be a good person.

2. Verse 6 broadens the perspective to say that no one can be of any esteem if God does not give him Wisdom. The implication is that this prayer is meant for all people.

- The reasons for this general inability to do anything of lasting significance without Wisdom will be discussed in verses 13-18.

III. Solomon then turns specifically to his role as king and special need for Wisdom in that calling.

A. The passage first describes God's calling to Solomon as king and builder of the Temple.

1. The first role is that he is to be a king and judge over God's sons and daughters.

- There is a powerful notion here of the people of God as the family of God. The Bible had describes the people of God collectively as the son of God. See, e.g., Ex. 4:22; Duet. 14:1; Is. 2:1; Hos. 11:1, 13:3.

- But here, reiterating the notion of the just man as a son of God, the passage says here that each one of the Chosen People is meant to be an adopted son or daughter of God. See Wis. 2:13, 18.

- The responsibility of leading a people, each of whom is called to this holiness is an overwhelming one.

2. Even more glorious, Solomon has received the calling to build the Temple, the glorious dwelling place of God's glory.

- On Mount Sinai, God gave Moses instructions on how to build the Tent of Dwelling for the Ark of the Covenant, see Ex. 25-40, which in turn became the model for the Temple. David had planned on the building and gave detailed instructions, guided by the Lord, regarding how it was to be built. See 1 Chron. 28:11-21. But the great role of building the Temple itself fell to Solomon. See 2 Sam. 7:1-17; 1 Kings 5:15-8:66.

- The passage describes the Temple as based upon the "dwelling place of old." At one level this reference could simply meant that the Temple was based upon the outlines of the Tent of Dwelling, where the ark of the Covenant had been until the Temple was built.

- But on a deeper level, one can from "from old" as from all time, in the sense that there is a Temple in heaven that the earthly Temple was based upon. The implication is that the worship in that Temple is meant to imitate the heavenly worship. The Letter to the Hebrews picks up on this theme, saying that Jesus fulfilled all of the purposes of the old Temple by His entrance into the eternal one, paving the way for us. See Heb. 8:5, 9:23-28.

B. Solomon then turns to Wisdom in praise and asks for her help.

1. Wisdom can guide Solomon on these tasks because she is the basis for all things, and thus can share that ability to comprehend all things together. By contrast, when Job demands to know why he, and by extension the innocent suffer, God tells him that he cannot understand such things for he was not there when the world was made and thus does not

understand its order. See Job 38:4-7.

2. Wisdom will also give Solomon understanding about how to know God's commandments and thus both to govern well and to guide worship properly.
3. And so here again Solomon makes his plea that God send Wisdom from His throne in heaven to come and guide him.
4. Moses did say of old that the commands of God are not too mysterious or remote for people. See Duet. 30:11-14. Of course, even these commandments were part of revelation, and thus part of the gift of Wisdom.
 - But all the same, both the people of God and the Gentiles had been notoriously unable to carry out that will in their lives. See Rom. 1:16-32, 3:1-20.
 - One reason for this failure is that human sinfulness keeps us from understanding even what should be obvious.
 - Thus, Solomon prays for Wisdom again, that he may guide God's people, both because of the flaws of human nature and because of the special role to which he has been called.

C. Solomon ends by anticipating Wisdom with him, guiding his every action and guarding him.

1. The guarding may be against enemies or folly and sin, or more likely both. The glory of Wisdom gives Solomon strength and brings him to the good.
 - The glory of God in general brings a sense of overwhelming wonder and even fear at one's own unworthiness as compared to God's power and holiness. See, e.g., Ex. 24:16-17; Ps. 29. His glory also draws all nations to His justice. See, e.g., Ps. 102:13-23; Is. 60:1-2.
 - Psalm 24 especially associates the glory of God with creation, the Temple, and the power of God, the themes of Solomon's request for Wisdom.
 - The prophet Ezekiel especially wrote of the glory of God and the Temple. In particular, because of the sinfulness

of the people, the glory of God departed the Temple, thus leaving Jerusalem open to invasion. Ez. 10. But, he prophesied, one day that divine glory would return and establish the new and glorious reign of God. See Ez. 43. The glory protected the people, but could not endure with their folly.

- Here, Solomon prays for that glory that will guide and protect him.

2. Solomon describes the benefits of Wisdom in three phrases.

a. First, his deeds will be acceptable, unlike the unworthiness that comes from a lack of Wisdom.

b. Second, following God's justice, he will know what is just and carry it out. Understanding the order of all things helps one judge cases justly and perceiving the beauty and glory of Wisdom gives one the courage to do what is just in practice.

c. Finally, Wisdom will make her worthy of the throne he inherited. Solomon realizes that he has been given a great trust, and has not earned it for himself. He thus needs her help to be worthy of this role.

IV. Solomon then proceeds onto a discussion of why we need Wisdom to carry out God's will and become worthy of our calling.

A. There are two parts to this last section of the prayer, both of which begin with a rhetorical question about who can know the counsel of God.

- The answer is basically that only one with Wisdom can do so. There is a balance here between the belief that reason or human talent alone is sufficient, on the one hand, and the belief that we can never arrive at the knowledge of God on the other. The prayer is saying that we are capable of receiving and using Wisdom to ascend to the celestial realms. See also Sir. 1

B. The first section dwells upon the weakness of the human mind.

1. Verse 13 asks how we can know the counsel of God or what His plans are. The otherness of God is so great that he asks how we can possibly arrive at that level.

- Not only in Job, but also in Isaiah, there is this reflection upon the mystery of God in contrast to the limits of human reasoning. See Is. 40:12-17. These passages, however, are surrounded by reflections upon the guidance God gives His people. See Is. 40:1-11, 28-31. And, in general chapters 41-44 of Isaiah go back and forth between describing the glory and the providence of God and the limits of humanity, and especially the weakness of human idols.

- Baruch likewise asks who can possibly understand the vastness of God's realm, and thus the ordering of the universe. But he answers that because wisdom is with God, and God has offered her to His chosen people, they can understand the will and plans of God. See Bar. 3:24-4:4. This wisdom then paves the way to their liberation. See Bar. 4:5-5:9.

2. Verse 14 describes the uncertainty of human reasoning and plans. Part of the idea is that if even our earthly plans are very uncertain and so often go astray, how much less can we understand the plans of God. As the Vatican I and Vatican II Councils stated, using the reasoning of St. Thomas Aquinas, there are some things that are simply beyond the human intellect to know; and even those things about God that we can know (e.g., the existence and goodness of God, the basic moral law, the immortality of the soul) would be known only with uncertainty and an admixture of error if there were no revelation. See Vatican II Council, Dei Verbum 6; Vatican I Council Dei Filius 2; St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica I-I q. 1 art. 1.

3. Verse 15 focuses on how much of our difficulty comes from the limitations of living in the world.

a. The verse describes how we live in a corruptible body and in a tent, invoking images of journeying through the desert in a tent. The first of the speeches of Job's friends emphasizes our nothingness and unrighteousness before God and compares our mortal bodies to tents that are plucked up before we really know wisdom. See Job 4:19. St. Paul likewise says that this life is only a tent compared to the eternal dwelling places awaiting us in heaven. See 2 Cor. 5:1.

b. Noteworthy, neither this book nor Job or St. Paul describes the earthly body as evil or something to be escaped from so that the spirit may be freed. Thus, while there is a common theme with Plato that our reasoning must rise above the earthly, there is a confidence here, absent in Platonic views, that with Divine Wisdom, there can be a

holiness in the world, and that the world can be sanctified. Compare and contrast with Plato, *Phaedo* 80d-81b, 82e-83b.

4. Furthermore, the views of even earth are very limited. All the more limited, therefore, is our view of the things of heaven.

- Jesus will later tell Nicodemus that, if one cannot understand even God's revelation about the earthly realm, he will be all the more unable to discern the things of heaven. See John 3:12. Likewise, this prayer asks how can we understand the things of heaven on our own if we cannot fully comprehend the things of earth.

C. But the final verses conclude that we can understand divine matters with Wisdom

1. Verse 17 largely restates the question from verse 13, but adds the answer, that God sends wisdom and His Holy Spirit.

a. The rest of the book will describe how God send Wisdom to the early patriarchs and then to guide God's people through the Exodus.

b. The book has referred to "the spirit of discipline" and as a "spirit," indeed the highest of created spirits. See Wis. 1:5, 7:22.

c. But here the book adds the term "holy spirit," either as another name for Wisdom or as an additional gift.

d. There would not yet have been a notion of a different person of God as the Holy Spirit, although with the knowledge of the New Testament, one can see the fulfillment of this passage. But there was a notion of God sending His spirit that gives life to creation, to the human race, to the prophets and kings, and finally to renew God's people. See Gen. 1:2, 2:7; Is. 11:2, 42:1, 61:1; Ez. 9:25, 11:19, 36:25-26, 37:5, 9. All of these notions come together in this idea of God sending this spirit of creation, calling to glory, and renewal that one may indeed know His ways in the heart, as the prophets had foretold long ago. See, e.g., Jer. 31:31-34; Ez. 36:25-28, 37:23-28.

2. The chapter ends on a positive note that Wisdom has been given, and so people have been able to know what is right and thus be saved.

a. As with Baruch, Proverbs and Sirach, there is a confidence that God can and will teach His faithful people. See Bar. 4:4; Prov. 2; Sir. 4:11-19; 24:29-31.

b. Jesus likewise speaks of Himself as the Bread of Life bringing people to know the ways of God and who sends the Holy Spirit that we may know the ways of God. John 6:45-51, 14: 25-31, 15:15-17, 26-27, 16:12-16.

3. This passage introduces the next chapter, which begins the discussion of how God has given this Wisdom in human history.