

# THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART XIII

## AN OVERVIEW OF WISDOM WORKING IN HISTORY

I. Chapter 10 transitions from the overall reflections on Wisdom in the first nine chapters to the specific application of those reflections to the Exodus, with associated commentary, in the last nine chapters.

A. The chapter gives an overview of the workings of Wisdom in the great figures of Jewish history leading up to the Exodus.

1. The chapter has a seven-fold structure, likely reflecting the seven days of creation and the notion of seven as the number of perfection. Compare with John 1:19-2:12

2. In particular, the chapter reflects upon the working of Wisdom in the lives of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, and then finally culminating in the Chosen People led by Moses.

- The first six figures seem to be arranged in three pairs, i.e., Adam and Noah, Abraham and his nephew Lot, and Jacob and his son Joseph.

3. Contrasted with these noble figures are the wickedness of either specific figures, such as Cain, Esau, or the "kings" or of humanity in general. There is an attempt here to contrast vividly justice and wickedness, with the noteworthy exception of Adam falling by his own fault and rising again by Wisdom.

B. The chapter does not refer to any of these figures by name, but instead describes them, assuming that the reader will know who they are.

1. Except Adam and Moses, they are all introduced simply as "the just man." Adam is introduced as "the first-formed father" and Noah "the Lord's servant" and "the holy prophet."

a. These references may be an attempt to universalize the figures, making them applicable to all people. The reference in the Gospel according to John to "the beloved disciple," rather than naming him John, may have had a similar purpose.

b. The term "just man" or "father" also creates a sense of complementarity between the feminine Wisdom and the masculine figures, emphasizing again the theme of the love of Wisdom from chapter 8.

2. Likewise, the wicked are not named, but simply called general terms, such as "the unjust man," "the nations," "their oppressors" or "their enemies."

C. The specific examples given here are meant as an example about how Wisdom delivers and makes prosper all who follow her.

II. The chapter begins with a reflection on the guidance of Adam and Abraham by Wisdom as contrasted with the wickedness of Cain.

A. At the beginning, the focus is primarily on Adam, rather than Eve.

1. The description was of Wisdom with Adam when he was alone, i.e., before the creation of Eve.

a. At one level, the description could be of Wisdom as at the center of the whole order of the universe, the order that made Adam head. That interpretation would be a continuation of the theme in chapters 8 and 9 that Wisdom is at the center of all creation. See Wis. 8:4-5, 9:2-4, 9. See also Prov. 3:19, 8:22-31; Sir. 1:7-8, 24:1-7.

b. This notion of Wisdom with Adam can also be seen as Wisdom guiding Adam in his first recorded acts, i.e. naming the animals and then accepting Eve as his bride. Gen. 2:19-20. The idea is that Adam, in ordering the universe and acting in his primordial authority and acting in primordial love was acting with Wisdom as his counselor. The message is that Wisdom is the source of all rightful authority and all rightful love. This interpretation would be building upon the theme of Wisdom as guiding Solomon, all rulers, and all people who intend to be virtuous. See Wis. 1:1, 6:9-21, 7:7-12, 27-30, 8:7.

2. The passage then describes Wisdom as raising Adam up after his fall.

a. There was a common Jewish tradition, which Christian tradition accepted, that Adam and Eve repented after the Fall. Genesis 3 records God's continuing mercy toward Adam and Eve and chapter 4 hints at their repentance, recording Eve (and thus presumably Adam) as crediting God with the birth of their children. See Gen. 4:1, 24.

b. The idea here is the Wisdom is also the one who guides people to repentance after a fall.

3. This comment on Adam concludes that Wisdom gave Adam "power to rule all things."

a. This comment could be simply a reiteration of Wisdom's role in the primordial order and power given to Adam.

b. But it could also mean that, after the fall, Wisdom guided Adam back to being able to control nature. The book has earlier commented on how Wisdom gave Solomon knowledge and nature, and will guide all her beloved to that knowledge. See Wis. 7:17-22, 8:8, 10. For, even now, God has given man authority over the things of the earth. See, e.g., Ps. 8:7-10, 115:16; James 3:7.

B. The passage then gives the counter example of how Cain withdrew from Wisdom and thus committed the first murder.

1. The implication is that withdrawing from Wisdom was the first sin, and that in turn led to the murder. Wisdom was available to him, and he chose not to have her.

2. Genesis chapter 4 describes in general terms that Cain's sacrifice was unacceptable and that, rather than repent and make it acceptable, Cain slew Abel out of envy.

3. The result was that Cain perished. It is noteworthy that God did not immediately kill Cain, and in fact put a mark on his forehead to keep him from being murdered. See Gen. 4:15. Thus perishing may refer more to a spiritual descent than physical death.

C. Going back to a positive example, the book then describes Noah as guided by Wisdom through the flood.

1. The book indicates that it was because of Cain that the world was destroyed through the flood.

a. One meaning could simply be that Cain was the paradigm of evil and violence that led to the Great Flood, or that Cain's murder of Abel set in motion a fundamental evil that would corrupt all the world.

b. Another meaning was that it was Cain's descendants who caused the wickedness initially, while the line of Seth and the other descendants of Adam and Eve was more just. But when the two lines intermingled, injustice took over and thus God sent the Flood. See, e.g., St. Augustine, *City of God* Bk. 15, ch. 23; St. John Chryostom *Homilies on Genesis* 22:4; St. Cyril of Alexandria *Commentary on Genesis* 2:2.

c. In any case, there is a dramatic contrast between the effects of the murder, and the effect of Noah's justice. A single life with or against Wisdom has cosmic consequences.

2. The passage particularly focuses on Wisdom's guidance of Noah as a pilot on the waters.

a. The emphasis on the waters (as opposed to focuses on the preparations for the journey or organizing things afterward) especially gives the impression of Wisdom guiding the just through the storms of life.

b. In Jewish thought chaos and oppression were often compared to the unstable sea, and God's guidance as preserving the faithful through these storms. See, e.g., Ps. 18:5, 69:2-3; 74:15, 89:10, 93:3-5; 124:4. Sometimes this chaos also was personified as the sea monster Leviathan or Rahab, whom God conquers and tames. See, e.g., Is. 27:1, 51:9; Job 26:12; Ps. 89:11. Here, Wisdom takes on that role of piloting the just Noah through the Flood, an image of this guidance of the just.

3. The passage describes the Ark as "the frailest wood."

a. As ships went, the Ark was of colossal proportions, 440' x 73' x 44'. See Gen. 6:15. But even this enormous boat was frail compared to the Flood and the task it had, i.e. preserving the known human race.

b. One message is that all human power is frail compared to the chaos and evil of the world, and especially death; it is Wisdom who guides her children.

c. We can now also see a fulfillment in salvation from death through the wood of the Cross.

III. The passage then proceeds onto a comment on Wisdom as guiding Abraham and his nephew Lot.

A. The book contrasts the just Abraham with the wickedness of the nations.

1. The universal wickedness is probably a reference to the building of the Tower of Babel, in which all the known nations combined in a prideful attempt to replace God, and were punished with division.

- It was the tower built by human hands that the nations sought as the source of all unity, rather than God. And so God used the building of that very Tower to scatter them and confuse them and scatter them throughout the earth. This event is one example of the theme in Wisdom that God uses the very things people worship to punish them. See, e.g., Wis. 12:27, 15:18-16:1.

2. The passage focuses on the most mysterious passage about Abraham, God's call for him to be willing to sacrifice his son Isaac.

- This call was one for radical obedience, putting everything under God, even the highest of human loves. Wisdom guided Abraham along this path, in dramatic contrast to the pagans who worshipped lesser things. The book will later comment on how a love of dead children that was put ahead of God led to idolatry. See Wis. 14:15-16.

- The Letter to the Hebrews does say that Abraham trusted that God would restore Isaac to life. See Heb. 11:19. But the faith of Abraham is very deep to entrust his son to God.

- One implication is that Wisdom allows us to order human loves rightfully, all under God.

3. The passage then describes at more length how Wisdom preserved Lot when he lived among the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were surrounded by three other cities, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar, which the author describes together with the Greek term Pentapolis.

1. Lot had chosen to live among the people because the land around them was fair although the people were wicked. See Gen. 13:12-13.

a. God chose tested the people of Sodom by sending angels to them. Lot tried to defend the angels against the attacks of the people, although it was the power of the angels themselves that defeated the mobs of

Sodom.

b. As a result of this attack, God destroyed the people of Sodom and Gommorrah by sending fire and brimstone from heaven, which destroyed the cities and turned the area into the desolate, sulpheric region it is now. See Gen. 19:1-29.

c. But because of Lot's justice, the angels warned him to escape with his family and not so much as to look back when the destruction occurred, which he did. But his wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. See Gen. 19:12-26.

d. The area would forever stand as a symbol of the destruction that comes from evil, although the prophet Ezekiel does speak of final day in which even the Dead Sea will be fresh again. See, e.g., Duet. 29:21-22; Is. 1:9-11; Ez. 47:10; 2 Pet. 2:6.

2. This passage indicate that it was Wisdom that delivered Lot from both the wickedness and the punishment due to it.

a. The emphasis here is on Lot's righteousness, rather than on his folly in choosing a land that had wicked people and later in his drunkenness and associated sins.

b. The message may be one of Wisdom as guiding the just in the midst of an unjust world.

c. The passage describes the destruction of the area around Penatpolis in dramatic terms.

- The "smoking desert" reflects the fact that there is a great deal of bitumen there that produces continual smoke, especially over the Dead Sea.

- The fruit that never ripens may refer to the apples that grow in the area that cannot be eaten.

d. There is perhaps also a warning against being too curious about evil in the salt tomb for Lot's wife.

3. The irony is that the wicked actions done seemingly in secret in Sodom resulted in that land becoming a permanent reminder of wickedness and the resulting destruction.

IV. The passage then turns to how Wisdom guided Jacob and his son Joseph in the midst of struggles in the world.

A. There is a more developed discussion of Jacob, and how Wisdom guided him in dealing with the anger of his brother Esau and the deception of his uncle Laban.

1. As with Lot, the passage focuses on Jacob's justice in peacefully dealing with difficult situations rather than his deception of his father Isaac to get his blessing and in dealing with his uncle Laban to get additional wealth from an agreement.

a. God had already selected Jacob to be blessed over Esau from his birth. But Jacob, at his mother's behest, still deceived Esau to get his blind father's blessing and birthright, which Esau had already foolishly promised Jacob. After this event, Esau planned to kill Jacob, and Jacob then fled to the land of his uncle Laban. Later, he would return and send offerings to pacify Esau, a strategy that worked. See Gen. 27:1-28:9, 33:1-19.

b. While fleeing Jacob received a vision of angels ascending and descending on a ladder from earth to heaven and back on the very spot that he was. See Gen. 28:10-22.

c. While with Laban, Jacob wished to marry Rachel, his beautiful daughter. Laban agreed to let him have Rachel in exchange for seven years of work. However, Laban tricked him into marrying the less beautiful older sister Leah, forcing Jacob to work for an additional seven years to win Rachel. See Gen. 29:15-30.

d. Later, Jacob used some a curious device to get the entire flock of offspring from a herd of sheep and goats, when Laban thought he was agreeing only to give him part of the offspring, i.e. the dark sheep and the speckled goats. (Laban had in fact plotted to give Jacob nothing.) See Gen. 30:25-33.

e. Finally, Jacob also struggled with an angel and was wounded, but seemingly also achieved a greater contact with God. See Gen. 32:23-33.

2. This passage describes how Wisdom guided Jacob in all of these affairs.

- a. There is a notion of Wisdom enabling a peaceful man to deal with anger and injustice toward him in a clever fashion, avoiding the damage that either his anger or another's anger toward him can cause.
- b. But in the midst of this cleverness in dealing with the world, there is also the contact with the divine shown in the vision of the angels on the ladder and the wrestling with the angel. Prayerfulness and wise dealings in the world are not contrary, but rather complement each other in Wisdom.
- c. The passage leaves out the more deceptive elements of Jacob's career to focus on what Wisdom, rather than folly led him to.

B. The passage then turns to how Wisdom guided Joseph in the midst of the grave injustices done to him so that she made them word to his eternal glory.

1. Jacob's career shows well the guidance of God in the midst of a gravely unjust world.

a. His ten jealous brothers sold him as a slave to a caravan, telling their father Jacob that he had been killed by a wild animal.

- Despite being a slave he prospered and was an assistant to Potiphar, a royal official.

b. However, because of his insistence on purity, Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of an attack, and he was thrown into a dungeon.

c. But there in the dungeon, God remembered him and gave him the ability to interpret dreams, an ability that would put him in the good graces of the Pharaoh and second in command of the kingdom.

d. Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers is particularly noteworthy, for he sensed all things as in God's hands, trusting him to bring good out of all of the injustice. See Gen. 45:4-8, 50:20-21.

2. This passage describes Wisdom again at work, both in giving Joseph that confidence in God and ability to sense His



will, and in his practical abilities to guide a kingdom.

- a. The passage does not specifically mention the ability to interpret dreams, possibly because it does not want to encourage an excessive desire to find messages in dreams. Sir. 34:1-17.
- b. The message about Joseph, and thus about all of the disciples of Wisdom, is the guidance of Wisdom through the travails of life, giving the just glory in the midst of them, the theme of chapters 3 and 4.