

## THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART XIV

### WISDOM IN THE DELIVERANCE OF THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

I. The end of chapter 10 concludes the section broadly describing the working of Wisdom in the great people of old and introduces the Exodus as the subject matter for the second half of the book.

A. The passage describes the Chosen People as "a holy people and a blameless race."

1. This description seems puzzling in light of the numerous infidelities and complaints of the Chosen People during the Exodus

2. However, the people were initially holy because God had chosen them, not because of their own merits. See, e.g., Duet. 7:6, 14:2. Their holiness then gave them a special duty to preserve and enhance it by lives worthy of that calling. See, e.g., Ex. 19:5-6; Lev. 11:44, 19:2. But holiness is given first and then confirmed (or rejected) by one's actions. This passage refers to the holiness of their initially calling.

3. While the Chosen People were later to blame for their infidelity, there were not to blame for their enslavement, and in fact seemed to have strong families and loyalty. See Ex. 1:7, 12, 15-20. God heard their prayers and delivered them as His people. See Ex. 3:6-10. Thus, they began at least, in a sense, as a blameless people.

B. The passage then says how Wisdom entered into Moses and gave him great power.

1. Here, he is described as "the servant of the Lord." The implication is that He gains power by being at the service of God. Obedience leads to empowerment. Cf. John 15:7-10.

2. The contrast is that the Lord's servant is greater than the most powerful earthly kings.

3. The reference is to Moses overcoming kings in the plural despite the fact that Moses went up against only one Pharaoh.

- The reference could simply be that, in opposing one Pharaoh, he was overcoming the whole line of Pharaohs. Cf. Ps. 105:30.
- But the reference could also be anticipating how Moses overcame the Amalekites and the kings of Moab, Arad, Sihon, Og, and Midian on the way to the Holy Land. See, e.g., Ex. 17:8-17; Num. 22:3-24:25, 31:1-12; Duet. 2:24-3:11; Ps. 136:17-22.

4. The image is of power from on high entering one who serves God. Wisdom is not merely a matter of speculative thought, but gives one the ability to accomplish things of lasting value.

C. The passage then says that Wisdom gave the Chosen People (the just) the reward of their labors and guided them.

1. When the Chosen People left Egypt, at God's command, they asked the Egyptians for many goods, and the Egyptians gave them everything they asked for, thus compensating them (at least partially) for their forced service. See Ex. 11:2-3, 12:34-36.

- One can see Wisdom here as either guiding the Israelites to ask the Egyptians for these goods, here at least obeying God, or as guiding the Egyptians to give them these goods.

2. The passage also describes Wisdom as guiding the people and protecting them by day and showing them the way with fire by night.

- Exodus describes how God guided the Israelites with a cloud by day and fire by night. See Ex. 12:21, 40:30.
- Here, for the purpose of describing the workings of Wisdom, the passage keeps the emphasis on the fire at night, keeping people able to travel in the dark. (Because of the heat, it seems likely that the people would have traveled in the dark or near dusk.)
- The passage emphasizes more the protection, rather than guidance, of the cloud by day. At one level, it could be a reference to the cloud moving between the Israelites and the Egyptians as the Egyptians pursued them to protect the Chosen People. See Ex. 14:19. It could also refer to the protection from the heat of the sun and any other dangers

in the desert by day. Cf. Ps. 105:39 (specifically referring to the protection of the Chosen People from the sun during the journey to the Promised Land), 121:6; Wis. 18:3; Is. 25:4, 49:10. Part of the idea is that Wisdom guides all of creation, and will guide creation to protect God's people in the past and in the future. See Is. 4:5-6.

3. Then the passage describes Wisdom as guiding the Chosen People through the Red Sea and destroying the pursuing Egyptian army.

- Once again Wisdom is guiding all of creation, here causing a colossal wind to part the Red Sea and then causing the sea to come together again when the Egyptians were in dispute.
- Noteworthy, part of the issue is Pharaoh's stubbornness and hardness of heart. See Ex. 14:4, 8. But, while the passage accredits Wisdom with the glorious workings of nature, it does not attribute this folly to Wisdom. It is rather the lack of Wisdom that leads to Pharaoh's pursuit.

C. This section concludes with the singing of hymns celebrating the victory of the Chosen People.

1. The most immediate reference is to the hymn the Israelites sang right after the passage over the Red Sea. See Ex. 16:1-21.

- Noteworthy, Miriam, the sister of Moses, is the only woman in the Old Testament described as a prophetess. See Ex. 15:20-21; Micah 6:4. She seems especially to be associated with the guidance of the Chosen People in music, which is not merely declarative, but gives power to God's people. Cf. Ps. 149 (describing the praise of God and the strength of God's people.)

2. There is also a reference to the composition of hymns about God's guidance for His people in general. See, e.g., Ps. 78, 105, 136. Wisdom guides the people in expressions of thanksgiving and praise of God.

3. Wisdom even guides the mute and infants to give praise to God. See, e.g., Ps. 8:3. The idea is that Wisdom gives all peoples that sense of God's glory and the ability to express it. Thus, for example, the Canticle of Mary can be seen as a quintessential expression of Wisdom. See Luke 1:46-55.

II. The next passage then describes in broad terms how God made the people prosper through their time in the desert.

A. The presentation is positive, not focusing on the worship of the golden calf, the failure to enter the Promised Land when commanded, or the numerous times of despair.

- Rather, the focus is on the workings of Wisdom in a positive sense, working through Moses and protecting the people from foes.

B. The passage once again speaks of Wisdom as acting through Moses, here described as "the holy prophet."

- Moses was the model for all prophets in the Old Testament, for he spoke to God face to face, and spoke for God at greatest length. See, e.g., Num. 12:6-8; Duet. 18:15-20; Hos. 12:14.

- The implication is that all prophets are guided by Wisdom to be able to speak for God. See Wis. 7:27.

C. The passage describes the journey in the desert, protected by against the natural desolation of the desert and against enemies.

- While not mentioning Wisdom directly, the implication is that Wisdom guided the Israelites to be able to find sustenance and to be able to overcome all enemies.

- The message is also for the future, i.e., that Wisdom will continue to guide her children along the path of this life against all natural and human dangers. See Duet. 29:1-13.

III. The book then moves onto the first great contrast, between the Israelites, who were given water from the rock, and the Egyptians, whose water turned to blood.

A. The passage reflects positively upon two events when God provided water to the Chosen People in the desert.

1. The first time occurred shortly after the departure from Egypt at the Chosen People as they were journeying to Mount Sinai. They ran out of water and grumbled against God. God then instructed Moses to strike a rock, from which water flowed. See Ex. 17:1-7.

2. The second time was shortly after the Israelites had refused to invade the Promised Land, and so were beginning their 40 year journey in the desert. At the area of Kadesh, the Israelites again ran out of water and God again told Moses to strike the rock to bring forth water. Moses struck the rock twice, and water came forth, although Moses was punished for failing to show forth God's sanctity, whether because of doubt, anger, or arrogance. See Num. 11:1-13.

B. The passage says they called upon the Lord in their need.

1. It was Moses and Aaron who called upon the Lord; most of the community seemed to grumble and despair. However, as verse 1 indicates, Moses' actions benefit the whole community.

2. The phrase called out to the Lord in their need seems to recall Psalm 107 verses 4 to 6, which use similar language. That psalm recounts God's providence toward His faithful people and punishment of the wicked generally. The psalm is a praise of God and a description of how His works, including both benefits and punishments, should bring people to repent of sins glorify God. The rest of the book of Wisdom likewise recalls how God uses benefits and punishments to bring people to repentance.

C. The dramatic contrast is with the waters of the Nile, along with the streams, canals and pools, turning to blood. See Ex. 7:1-24.

1. The punishment matches the crime here, for as they shed the blood of infants and killed them, see Ex. 1:15-22, so now the river, which was in a sense their mother, will give them blood.

2. As Moses' prayer benefits the whole community and is attributed to them, so Pharaoh's crime is attributed to the whole nation.

- The result seems harsh, but it is simply an application of the fact that people affect each other, and in particular a ruler affects his whole nation. See, e.g., Sir. 9:17-10:5; Prov. 29:4. This book has earlier emphasized how important Wisdom is for rulers. See Wis. 1:1, 6:1-21, 24.

3. This punishment is the first example of a theme of Wisdom, the notion that the very things that constitute sins come back to punish the sinners. In committing sins, people may not realize it, but they are becoming slaves of the sins, and will be

punished by them. See John 8:34; Rom. 6:16-17. Here, the Egyptians commit sin by shedding blood, and so are punished by their river doing the same. Cf. Gen. 9:6.

D. The passage makes it clear, however, that God was trying, both by providing the water and by turning water into blood, to teach the Israelites and the Egyptians.

1. Noteworthy, the thirst of the Israelites in the desert was part of their training, preparing them for the miraculous drawing of water.

- This preparation is one example of the ways in which God draws one deeper into the spiritual realm by means of physical struggles.
- The thirst also gave them a sense of the severity of the punishment inflicted upon the Egyptians.

2. The contrast is between the Israelites, who were "mercifully chastised," and the Egyptians who were "judged in wrath."

Likewise, Deuteronomy had described the time in the desert as a time of testing and discipline. See Deut. 8:1-5. This interpretation is a general principle of the fact that God brings out greatness out of struggle. See Wis. 3:5-6; Sir. 2:1-11.

- To those who follow God, struggles in the world are paradoxically shows of God's providence, to make us better and draw us closer to Christ. See 5:3-10; Mark 8:34; Heb. 12:7-11.
- By contrast, to those who reject God, struggles are seen only as God's wrath, leading to condemnation. See, e.g., Rev. 9:20-21, 16:9,11.
- There is likewise a contrast between a stern king and a loving father. Both promulgate rules and engage in disciplining (and rewards), but one for the sake of having servants and the other for the sake of raising sons and daughters who will inherit part of the kingdom. In Romans and even more in Galatians, St. Paul emphasizes this point. See Rom. 8:1-27; Gal. 3:7-5:12. Jesus likewise said at the Last Supper that His disciples were no longer slaves, but friends. John 15:12-17; cf. John 1;12; 1 John 3:2.

3. The Egyptians suffer, both because of their own struggles and by knowing God's providence for the Israelites, but this suffering can bring conversion.

- The suffering is described as twofold: (1) their own punishment; and (2) the knowledge that God had provided for the Chosen People, which could involve either envy or knowledge that, had they turned to God in repentance, the punishment need not have happened. When the Israelites were leaving, the Egyptians were well disposed to them. See ex. 11:3, 12:36. It is possible that that disposition did not last long, or that the Egyptians were simply regretful of their own behavior.

- Moses' prayers for mercy on Israel indicate that the Egyptians knew, or eventually found out about, how the Israelites were faring in the desert. See Num. 14:13-14

4. There is an optimistic conclusion, indicating that there may have been some sort of conversion.

- Verse 14 indicates that, although the Egyptians had rejected Moses, they would come to marvel at him because the thirst of the Chosen People resulted in His Providence, while they had to dig laboriously to get water.

- Describing Moses as "him who of old had been cast out and exposed" is interesting because Moses was not literally cast out, but rather hid among the reeds and rescued by a daughter of the Pharaoh. It was rather the multitude of Hebrew boys who were so cast into the river. There seems to be an identification of Moses with those slaughtered children; he would represent them to the Pharaoh again and bring judgment for their deaths. Cf. Wis. 5:1-5; Rev. 11:11-12.

- There may also be a foretaste of Jesus who was cast out and killed, but then appears in glory.

- In any case, the passage concludes that the Egyptians marveled at Moses. It is not clear what effect this wonder produced, but there can be some hope that at least some of them would be brought closer to the true God, or at least future generations would be, by the events of the Exodus. Thus, for example, there was one monotheistic Pharaoh Akehnaton, who reigned from 1364-1347 B.C., which would seem to be shortly after the Exodus. See 1 Kings 6:1 (the construction of the Temple, starting about 960 B.C. was 480 years after the Exodus began.) This

monotheism, however, did not survive his reign.

- The Psalms would speak of a day when even Egypt would be brought before the throne of God, indicating how God can make even enemies His people. See Ps. 87:4-7. There may be some implication that the Egyptian Jews to whom this book is written are meant to bring this result about.