

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART XV

GOD'S JUSTICE AND MERCY

I. Starting in chapter 11, verse 15, there is a long section that comments on God's mercy and justice and the source of idolatry in the context of the plagues on Egypt that involved animals (i.e. frogs, flies, gnats and locusts.)

A. The overall structure emphasizes the connection between the themes: (1) that the plagues were not random, but rather tailored to fit the sins of the Egyptians; (2) that God even in punishing seeks to bring about repentance because He wants to have mercy on all things; and (3) that idolatry comes from desires that have gone terribly astray and lead to corruptions.

- By mixing the commentary on the four plagues involving animals with the other two themes the author is emphasizing the interconnectedness between the themes. God's justice and mercy are two sides of the same coin, and in achieving the goals of God it is helpful to know where this idolatry that He wants to overcome came from and what its dramatic effects are.

B. The overall structure has the themes about God's mercy and the causes of idolatry in the middle with the increasing comments on the plagues surrounding them.

1. Chapter 11, verses 15 and 16 introduces the overall theme that God sent senseless beasts to punish the Egyptians because they worship beasts.

2. Chapter 11, verse 17 to chapter 12, verse 22 then emphasizes that God punishes but does not destroy because He wants to bring about repentance, which works for God's people, but not for all. It uses as an example the Canaanites who occupied the Promised Land before the Israelites.

3. Chapter 12, verses 23 to 27, describes the animal plagues as designed to mock idolatry, a message that most people did not seem to get.

4. Chapters 13, 14, and 15, up to verse 17, then describe idolatry as coming from various causes, such people's wonder at nature, the desire to receive outside help from something, the mourning for the dead, the desire to honor the images of

kings and nobles, or simply the excessive focus on the works of one's hands. It also describes in sharp terms the folly of worshipping mere things and the terrible sins that can come from it.

5. Chapter 15, verse 18 to chapter 16, verse 12 then returns to the plagues on Egypt involving insects, but now with the contrast to the punishments of serpents that God sent to the Israelites after one of the rebellions. See Num. 21:4-20. The former was not healing, either physically or spiritually, while the latter did lead to a physical cure and (temporarily at least) to repentance.

6. The section then concludes in chapter 16, verses 13 to 15, by contrasting God's justice, which punishes but can lead back to life, with man's malice, which is simply destructive.

II. This portion of the book begins with a quick introduction to the plagues involving beasts.

A. The author describes them as punishments for the animals that the Egyptians worshipped.

1. Except for the frogs, there is not a one for one relationship between the animals sent through plagues and the animals the Egyptians worshipped.

- The Egyptians worshipped both natural things (the sun above all, and the river and storms, subjects of other comments in the Book of Wisdom) and animals, such as crocodiles, serpents, frogs, and scarab beetles.

2. The plagues mostly used other animals, possibly because plagues of such things as crocodiles, serpents, scarabs would be too devastating.

- The plague of locusts may have been designed to destroy economic wealth, the desire for which is a common form of idolatry.

B. This section sets up the overall theme that God punishes by the very thing that causes sins.

1. The book will later explain that the reason for this parallel is not only justice but teaching people the folly of idolatry.
2. Moses had earlier said that people will receive what they choose, life or death and the Book of Proverbs had earlier described Wisdom as saying that, if people will ignore her, they will reap the fruits of their own folly. See Duet. 30:14, 19; Prov. 1:31-33. This passage reiterates the theme in the context of Egypt, but adds the notion of the guidance of God through that balance as well.

III. The passage then discusses God's mercy even in punishments in general, before turning in chapter 12 to an application specifically to the Canaanites.

A. The argument begins by pointing out that God could have sent much worse punishments that would have caused utter destruction.

1. The passage introduces God with an anthropomorphism, referring to His "almighty hand."

- There may be a recalling of the promise that the souls of the just are in the hand of God from chapter 3. Here, the hand of God also punishes, but it is the same God who wants to save all people.
- The hand of God is a frequent image reflecting both the providence of God for His people, and His judgment of the nations. See, e.g., Duet. 33:3; Ps. 89:14; Is. 51:16, 62:3; John 10:28.
- But, as if to balance the anthropomorphism, the passage in the same breath emphasizes that God's hand fashioned all things out of formless matter. The phrase "fashioned the universe out of formless matter" is a retelling of Genesis 1-2, but here using terms of form and matter from Greek philosophy. In Greek philosophy, form is the essence of the thing, while matter is the stuff of which it is made. However, unlike Greek philosophy, the author presents a personal caring God behind all of creation.
- Throughout this passage there will be both a comparison of God to humans as with the description of His fatherly care, or the call to recognize the might of God through the glory of His creation. See, e.g., Wis. 7:12, 21, 13:3-4. But there will also be a sharp contrast between God's reign and that of humans with God as all powerful, all just and all merciful. See, e.g., Wis. 11:21, 12:12:11-14.

2. The author then describes how easily God could have destroyed the Egyptians.

- He begins with thoughts about a plague of lions or bears. There may have a reminder of the bears that God sent in response to the ridicule of Elisha, see 1 Kings 59:11, and the lion sent to kill a false prophet in Judah. See 1 Kings 13:24. God also frequently showed His might through His heroes taming or conquering lions. See Judg. 14:6; 1 Sam. 17:34-36; Dan. 6:16-24.

- Possibly mocking pagan mythology, the author then describes how God could have created unknown beasts that pour out fire and smoke from their mouth and eyes or, like Medusa, can slay even by their looks. There may be a contrast between the true God and the myths, which involved such destructive wraths and caprices of nature. Or the reference to beasts that breath out smoke and fire could be a reference to Leviathan, the symbol of chaos, as described in Job 41:10-13. The message is that God could have released the full force of chaos (or Leviathan) onto the Egyptians, rather than just small amounts.

- The passage then points out that even a quick single blast or a gradual destruction condemnation would have destroyed the Egyptians. The passage invokes another antropormorphism in describing the breath of God, which is creative at the beginning of humanity and throughout history, see Gen. 2:7, Ps. 104:30, but also can shake the world, see Ps. 18:16, Is. 11:4; 2 Thess. 2:8.

- The whole passage gives the impression that the Egyptians were really in great danger, if the almighty God had been a wrathful as humans or pagan gods.

B. But then the passage switches gears and describes how God is not like us, being both more powerful and more merciful.

1. It begins by reminding the reader that God created all things carefully and in an orderly fashion, by measure and number and weight. All of the universe is God's careful handiwork. The implication is that He has a purpose for all of it.

2. The passage then describes the great power of God, beginning with another antropormorphism, the powerful arm of God, but then challenging our imagination by saying that the whole universe is as a grain on a balance or the morning dew compared to God. A grain on a balance was a tiny pebble used for fine measurements on scales.

3. But then the passage describes how God, because He is all-powerful, can be merciful. An earthly ruler may be afraid of showing mercy to enemies for fear that they will rise up against him, or may be afraid of showing mercy to an offender for fear of seeming weak or losing control. But God has no such concerns.

4. The passage then says that, because God created all things, He loves all things and does not wish any to perish

- There is an explicit refutation of dualism, the belief that there are good and evil gods (or a good God and an evil God), who created different parts of the world and Gnosticism, which involved the belief that the material world is evil, and only the spirit is good.

- Rather God has a purpose for all things, and does not wish for any to fail of its purpose. There is perhaps a reflection of Psalm 145, which praises God's creative providence in general and in verse 8 proclaims God's love for every creature.

- There is a point here that God not only created all things, but continually sustains them in being.

5. In the midst of this declaration of God's goodness, the passage then states that God "overlooks" people's sins that they may repent.

- The implication is not that God does not punish sins, but rather that He sees beyond them to the goodness of each person and in fact each thing. There is harkening back to the declaration in Exodus that God's mercy is greater than His punishment; God does not fail to punish sin, but His punishments continue for three to four generations, while His mercy continues for a thousand. See Ex. 34:6-7.

6. The declaration concludes by referring to God as the "lover of souls" whose spirit is in all things.

- There is perhaps a reflection here of the declaration and prayer of Isaiah, who spoke of how much God loved His wayward children and prayed that this love be victorious. See Is. 63:9-19. Here that declaration of love is extended to all people, even Israel's enemies.

- God's creative abilities make Him love each soul, not seeing one as simply a replacement for the other.

- The declaration is that His spirit is not only in human beings, but at least to some degree in all things. The author is recalling his theme from chapter 1 that Wisdom is the spirit of God and fills all things on earth.

C. The passage then draws the conclusion that God rebukes sinners a little at a time, desiring that they come to repentance.

- The implication is that, as indicated in the first five chapters, we have immortal souls that can shine forever, and thus bringing people to repentance and thus to this destiny is the greatest of all works and worthy any sacrifice.

- Abandoning wickedness is presented as allied to believing in God. Part of the idea is that evil actions tend to darken the mind and make one less desirous of knowing God. See, e.g., John 3:19-20. By contrast, abandoning evil clears the mind and leads to a greater knowledge of God. See Catechism 29-30.

IV. The Book of Wisdom then applies insights about the loving, but disciplining God to the situation of the Canaanites who lived in the Promised Land before the Chosen People came.

A. The passage begins with a ringing indictment of the horrors that were practiced in the land before the Chosen People came.

1. Before the Chosen People entered the Promised Land, Moses had denounced the violent and decadent practices of the people of that land, and warned Israel against imitating them. See, e.g., Ex. 23:24; Lev. 18:21; Duet. 12:31, 18:9-14, 20:18; see also Gen. 15:16. They were killed or driven out of the land so that they could not become a temptation to the Israelites. Some of the tribes were allowed to remain, to test the Israelites, and they often failed that test. See Josh. 3.

2. Here, the author is doing two things. First, he is stating why they had to be driven out, i.e. because the land could not be holy as long as they were there. Second, he is presenting them as an extreme example of how God shows mercy even in the midst of punishment, and even to the most wicked of people.

3. The author here describes the Chosen People in what was then the Promised Land as a "colony" of the Lord. The implications are: (1) that even the Promised Land is not their true native land, for their native land is in heaven, cf. Heb. 11:13-16; and (2) that the Lord intends to establish more colonies now that that one has been firmly made, cf. Ps. 87:4-7; Is. 66:18-21; Dan. 2:44-45.

B. The passage goes on to say that even to such a wicked people, God showed what mercy He could.

1. The author says that the wicked people of the land "were but men," presumably indicating that it was partially weakness of intellect and will that led them into corruption, as opposed to demons, who are totally corrupt. Psalm 78 has a similar passage that describes God's treatment of His Chosen People. See Ps. 78:33-39.
2. Thus, the passage points out, God sent 'hornets' ahead of them, as Moses promised. The idea was to make the land unpleasant and get them to leave before being defeated and then either killed or enslaved in battle. See Ex. 23:28; Duet. 11:12; Josh. 24:12. The term hornets may have been literal, or may have stood for troubles in general, for in Hebrew the term could also mean discouragement in general.
3. As with the earlier passage about the animals sent as a plague on Egypt the author points out that God could have sent worse punishments.

C. The passage then explains that God was giving them, like the Egyptians, a chance to repent, although he indicates that it did not work.

1. The idea again is that gradual punishment is meant to indicate to the sinner that he is sinning and should turn back. Physical pain gives the same indication that one is doing something physically harmful, and should turn back.
2. The passage does say, however, that they did not repent (probably referring to the nation as a whole, not to each and every individual.)
 - The explanation is that evil was in their nature. This reference could mean that there was an evil start to the nation, and thus it was unredeemable. See Gen. 9:25-27. Presumably the just among them would leave, as Lot did for Sodom and Gomorrah.
3. The passage indicates that God knew they would not repent, but allowed them space anyway. This foreknowledge could be read in several ways.

- God may have known that they nation would not repent, even though individuals may, for the nation was not meant to last. For the whole nation, thus His sending of punishments gradually was a show to the world that their destruction was caused by their own refusal to repent, as the Geresene demoniacs destroyed themselves when Jesus granted them the favor of living in the bodies of swine. See Mark 5:11-20.

- To the degree that God knows individuals will not repent, that knowledge is in eternity. Thus, it is not that the individual's future is determined while he is on earth, but rather God's knowledge, being outside of time, encompasses past, present and future together.

4. This passage leads to the theme of the next eight verses, which describe God's motive as the mercy that is allied with His might and His justice.