

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART XVI

THE MAJESTY, MERCY, AND MYSTERY OF GOD

I. Chapter 12, verses 12-22 describe God's justice and mercy as above human questioning, but still orderly and thus, to some degree, comprehensible.

A. This section is largely arranged in three parts.

1. Verses 12 to 14 present the mystery of God, above all human questioning.
2. But then verses 15 to 18 then presents God's mercy, justice and might as all unified and showing forth His divine plan. Although we have no right to demand an explanation from God, we can understand His plans, at least to some degree.
3. Verses 19 to 22 apply these principles to God's treatment of His people and also of their enemies and oppressors.
4. The passage is warning against three errors: (1) a pagan view that God (or the gods) somehow need us and thus feel compelled to explain themselves to us; (2) an overly rationalist view of God as entirely explainable; or (3) an overly pietistic notion that God cannot be understood at all.

B. The passage begins by dismissing the notion that God withheld His full wrath because He needed to justify Himself before the people.

1. The author begins by saying that no one can threaten God, and thus He does not need to justify Himself. There is a contrast here with the pagan notions of God as needing human worship and of humans as able to negotiate with God.
 - The author may be responding to a view that God did not destroy the Egyptians, Canaanites and other enemies because He would need them later.
2. Continuing a theme common in Wisdom literature, the author goes further and says that no one is in a position to question God's ways. Cf. Job 9, 38-41; Ps. 139:2-6, 17-18; Rom 9:19-23.

- The author begins with four rhetorical questions that emphasize God's power over all things and all nations and human inadequacy to defend the nations or overcome God's judgment.
- In answer to the questions, the passage points out that there is no one above God who can judge Him. In order to judge something or someone, one must refer to a standard or person above it. The author here points out that there is no standard above God by which to judge His actions.
- There is perhaps here a reflection of the Book of Job in which Job realizes that he cannot resist God, but demands and answer from Him all the same. See Job 9:1-24, 31:34-37. God responds not with an explanation but rather by referring to the mystery of all creation and thus even more the mystery of His plans, although He does later refer to Job's justice and restores him. See Job 38-41.
- St. Paul likewise warns in the letter to the Romans against judging God's actions in showing more mercy to one person than another. See Rom. 9:14-24.
- Jeremiah also speaks of God's unquestionable majesty in terms of a potter and the piece of pottery he makes, saying that we cannot question God's ways any more than an object of clay can question its maker. See Jer. 18:1-12. But here Jeremiah nevertheless explains why God sometimes does not punish evil or reward good, namely, because the people change, thus averting punishment or forfeiting reward.

C. The author then begins to explain God's justice and mercy as based upon His very self. God does not owe it to us to be just and merciful but rather simply is just and merciful of Himself.

1. God does not condemn the innocent because it is unjust and thus contrary to Himself. And He is consistent with Himself.

- This justice Abraham understood at the very beginning of his relationship with God, even as He accepted the mystery of God in calling for the sacrifice of His son. See Gen. 19:22-32, 22:1-19.

2. Verse 16 presents the might and power of God as the source of both His justice and mercy. The two forces are not contradictory, but rather both flow from the same source and, in different ways, reflect the wisdom of God.

- In contrast to the wicked, who make their strength the norm of justice, see Wis. 2:11, here justice and mercy spring from God's might.

3. Verses 17 and 18 then comment on God's justice and mercy as both directed toward the truth of God's majesty.

a. First, even the punishments of God are meant to draw people closer to Him.

- In response to doubt, God shows strength, which could be in punishing enemies or providing for the just. Those who doubt God should look to how He has brought about justice by his might.

- To those who know God, but still disobey Him, His punishments can be seen as rebukes to bring them back.

b. Second, precisely because He is sovereign in majesty, He can show forth mercy.

- God's might allows Him to be merciful without fear of losing control or having to justify His actions to another. Thus, paradoxically, the majesty of God can, if accepted, give an assurance of forgiveness.

D. The author then applies these principles to God's actions in history and reflection upon the right response.

1. First, one conclusion is that, if one is to imitate God, one must be both just and merciful. Jesus picks up on this theme, calling for His disciples to be like God in justice and mercy. See, e.g., Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36, 15:1-32.

2. Second, there is the call to place hope in God, confident that repentance is possible, and that even God's punishments are a call to reconciliation.

3. God treats friends and enemies differently, although He punishes both.

- God's enemies receive more the destructive punishments leading to death, but even here granting time for

repentance.

- God's people, by contrast, are His sons, whom He delivers blows to in order that they may find time for repentance. He is more exacting on them, for He does such things as call for them to fulfill a detailed law and be tested in the desert, while the pagans are called simply to free the Israelites and (eventually) cease from pagan worship. But repentance and restoration also seem more likely from those called to a higher level for they have the covenant and can more easily see the hand of God at work. Jesus will say elsewhere that to those who have more will be given. See, e.g., Luke 8:18, 19:26.

E. Overall, the author is at the same time saying that God's ways are above human understanding, but also that we can, with His help, to some degree comprehend them. God is reasonable and orderly, but we cannot fully comprehend this reason and order. Cf. John Paul II, Fides et Ratio 18.

II. The passage then applies these principles to the plagues that involved animals.

A. Reiterating the principle from chapter 11, verse 23 states again that God punishes people through the very things they sin.

- This theme has been the controlling principle of the commentary on the animal plagues, beginning each section that describes them. See Wis. 11:16, 16:1.

B. This section takes the theme further by ridiculing the worship, not only of animals, but of the most worthless and disgusting among them.

- It is noteworthy that the most noble of the animals, such as horses and eagles, and the most useful, such as donkeys and dogs, generally were not worshipped. It seems that, when people saw the natural goodness of an animal, they were not as tempted to idolatry.

- Thus, for example, among animals, the Egyptians tended to worship gods in the form of such things as scarabs, crocodiles, and serpents.

- In the Book of Job, God points to a strange beast (possibly the hippopotamus) and the chaos of the sea (possibly

symbolized by a crocodile) as an indication of the mystery of His plans. See Job 40:1-41:26. It appears that people see in odd animals a mystery, know that the divine is mysterious, and fashion gods in the shape of these creatures.

C. God begins by punishing in small ways (referred to here as child's play) because at first the pagans are erring more out of ignorance, like children.

- There is a possibly implication that these pagans can, by reforming become children of God.
- The child's play may refer to earlier, milder punishments that predate the plagues. Or it could mean the earlier plagues (the river turning to blood, and the plagues of frogs, gnats and flies) that were not as devastating as the later ones, the pestilence, boils, crops destroyed by hail and finally the death of the first born. The darkness is the second to last plague both because it reflected the defeat of Egypt's national god, Ra, who was worshipped as connected to the sun, and because of the terrifying fear that it brought.
- The passage says that the pagans did not repent, and so the worse animal plagues came through other things the Egyptians worshipped. Even the death of the first born can be counted among the things the Egyptians worshipped for they focused very heavily on the dead, through such means as pyramids and consulting of the dead great figures, with Osiris, the king of the dead, being central in worship.

D. Interestingly, the passage concludes that the pagans did come to know God, but that final condemnation came with this knowledge.

1. The idea seems to be that the plagues and God's providence for His people perhaps did bring about (with the Egyptians, the Canaanites, or others) a certain belief in the one true God.

- Exodus does say that the Egyptians became favorable to the Israelites. See Ex. 11:3, 12:36. There may also be a memory of the Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, who during his reign from 1375 to 1366, tried to bring about a monotheistic religion. His son Tutankhamen (King Tut) reversed the move and the brief move away from paganism ended.

2. But the condemnation would come from the fact that this knowledge was only transient and did not lead to real

repentance.

- Jesus would say later that the people's failure to repent was worse because they saw the wonders that He performed. See, e.g., Matt. 11:20-24; Luke 10:13-16.
- Final condemnation could have been the death of the first-born, or the ultimate exile from God.

III. In chapter 13, the author then turns to the explanations of idolatry, beginning with the most understandable (but still foolish) worship of the forces of nature.

A. The argument begins and ends, in verses 1 and 9, with a description of the failure to proceed from knowing the power and beauty of nature to appreciating the majesty of her creator.

- The worship of gods in the forms of natural powers (e.g., the sun, the rain, storms, etc.) would have been more common in Canaanite and Greek religion than Egyptian. But, after the time of Alexander the Great, there begins to be a mixing of religious beliefs.
- Near the beginning of his final discourse Moses first warned the Israelites about the "degradation" of animal worship, and then turned to the perhaps more subtle form of idolatry regarding natural forces, near the beginning of his final discourse. See Ex. 4:19.

B. On this point, the author says that the pagans who worshipped nature gods began rightly, recognizing the glory of nature, but were blind to the God who made them all.

1. The Psalmist and the prophets certainly knew of the glory of nature, but saw nature as glorifying God. See, e.g., Ps. 8:4, 104:5-30, 148:1-10; Dan. 3:39-81.
2. Here, the author is arguing that, if these things have might and beauty, there must be a source, and that source is God.

3. The author invites the question from where the might of the mightiest forces come, or from where do beautiful things receive their beauty. His answer is that such things can only come from God.

- Science may now explain what the forces of nature are, but how they came to be remains mysterious without a reference to their creator.

- Likewise, there may be theories of what beauty is, but the question of where the beauty of all things, including and especially those of nature, leads back to God. See Catechism 2500-2501; cf. St. Augustine, Confessions 2:5, 4:13.

C. The author, on the one hand, describes the desire for God that this nature worship is based upon, but also refuses to pardon the idolaters.

1. On the one hand, he says that their blame is less than that of other pagans because their natural desire to find the source of power in beauty is good. It is unlike those who simply worship beasts, or the creation of their hands, or who make their desires the measure of all things.

- The author describes them as "distracted" in their search for the source of all things by the allure of created things. Similarly, in Acts, St. Paul argues to the people of Lystra that the natural forces were signs of God's goodness and that they should now turn to the worship of the true God. See Acts 17:14-17. He also later refers to nature as groaning in travail waiting with us for redemption from God. See Rom. 8:19-23.

2. But the author also argues that they are not entirely innocent because they should have completed the process of tracing the source of goodness and beauty back to God.

- St. Paul will pick up on this theme, indicating that the false nature worship cannot stay simply at that level, but will decline to the level of animal worship and finally to unnatural vice. See Rom. 1:18-32. Likewise, the Book of Wisdom will describe how the worship of animals leads to terrible sins. See Wis. 14:12, 22-29.

- St. Paul does hold out some hope that an understanding of natural moral law may lead people back to God. See Rom. 2:14-16.