

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART XVII

THE FOLLY AND CAUSES OF IDOLOTRY

I. From the middle of chapter 13 to verse 17 of chapter 15 the Book of Wisdom condemns the folly of worshipping those things made by human hands as utter folly and resulting in decadence and death.

A. Verse 10 of chapter 13 sets up the theme that the worship of human creations is the worship of death.

1. The first half of chapter 13 had dealt with the more understandable, but still foolish, worship of the forces of nature. The result of this false worship is incompleteness and ignorance.

2. As the passage describes lower forms of idolatry, the condemnation is much sharper. It goes on to describe the result the horrible abominations that come from idolatry, abominations, which lead to death.

B. The overall structure proceeds in a chiasmic fashion, with the causes and effects of idolatry in the middle.

1. Verse 10 introduces the theme of the foolishness and death of idolatry.

2. Chapter 13, verse 11 to chapter 14, verse 2 describes the making of idols from wood and the folly of trusting things that are incapable of action, contrasting that with the useful things made by craftsmen.

3. Chapter 14, verses 3 to 11 contrasts the providence of God through wood (a meaning that will be brought even higher with the Cross) with the condemnation of those who trust in things made of wood.

4. Chapter 14, verses 12 to 21 describe the origins of idolatry, especially with reference to the remembrance of the dead, the flattery of rulers, and the excessive adoration of objects of art.

5. Chapter 14, verses 22 to 31 describe the horrible effects of idolatry, the worship of dead things, especially with reference to the worst forms of impurity and violence.

6. Chapter 15, verses 1 to 6, again contrast God's providence to repentant sinners who trust in Him with the judgment against those who love and yearn for dead things.

7. Chapter 15, verses 7 to 13 describes again the folly of making idols, here idols from clay. It goes on to condemn in the harshest terms those who willfully promote idols for a profit, contrasting with them the production of articles for clean purposes.

8. Chapter 15, verse 14-17 concludes by recalling again the theme of death, saying people are utterly foolish to use their gift of life on earth for the sake of things that are dead.

C. This section, along with the beginning of chapter 13, can also be seen as describing a continuing descent from the worship of natural forces to mistaken worship of human artifacts to the degrading moral practices that come from idolatry, and finally to the deliberate fraud and temptation of idol makers.

1. Chapter 13, verses 1 to 9 had described the worship of natural forces as flawed and ignorant, but somewhat understandable, and perhaps open to God.

2. Chapter 13, verse 10 to chapter 14, verse 21 deals with the worship of things of human making and mocks it, but does present it as partially based upon the errant results of natural tendencies, the desire for guidance, the longing for a deceased child, the desire to please a ruler, or the appreciation for the beauty of an image. The folly is in finding the final good in things that are but a means and an image.

3. Chapter 14, verse 22 to chapter 15, verse 6 then describes the greater degradation of immoral and violent practices that come from idolatry, with the contrast with the repentance that comes from serving the true God.

4. Chapter 15, verses 6 to 14 then describe the greater evil of those who deliberately create false idols, knowing them to be false but desiring profit and enslavement of God's people.

5. Chapter 15, verses 15-17, 15-17 concludes with a condemnation of looking to dead things with the spirit that God has lent us. There is a slight optimism here, recognizing that even idolaters are better than their idols, thus describing something that can be redeemed.

D. Overall, this section explains the evil of idolatry by reference to things that are naturally good (e.g., craftsmanship, the desire for guidance, mourning for the dead), but that have gone terribly wrong. Behind this explanation is the confidence that all things are naturally good, see Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 31; Wis. 1:14, and that all humans want the good. The problem is that we settle for something less than the almighty God, the source of all goodness. Thus, behind idolatry and every in is fundamentally a lack of the good. See Catechism 1849; St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-I q. 18, art. 5, reply 5.

II. Chapter 13, verse 11 to chapter 14, verse 11 contrast the folly of worshipping things of wood with the providence of God.

A. It begins by describing the legitimate uses of wood, and then describes the gradual descent into idolatry.

1. First, the craftsman makes useful things out of wood, e.g., furniture, boats, utensils. Second, he uses the refuse for fire for warming and cooking. And then, the wood that cannot easily burn, e.g., because of knots, he carves as a pastime.

2. Then, things start going more and more wrong.

a. First, he carves "with listless skill," indicating a sort of idleness that can be a temptation to sin.

- There are warnings in both the Old Testament and New against idleness, for when the spirit is not occupied with good, there is a temptation to sin. See, e.g., 2 Sam. 11:1; Sir. 33:28; 1 Tim. 5:13; Tit. 1:10; cf. Luke 11:24-26.

- Isaiah had likewise traced the gradual descent into idolatry from the idle use of things. See Is. 44:12-20.

b. Then, he makes the wood into an image of a person or worthless animal, which then becomes an object of temptation.

- God had forbidden the Jews against making an image of Him. See, e.g., Duet. 4:15-16. As the Catechism explains, since the Incarnation, this prohibition is no longer in place, but rather we can now see sacred images as pointing to the invisible God. See Catechism 2130-32.

- God also forbade the worship of images of people, animals, or even natural objects. See, e.g., Ex. 20:4, 34:17; Duet. 4:15-19, 27:15. In order to avoid even the temptation to this idolatry, Jewish practice had been to avoid even having images of people or animals. Thus, the making of images of animals or creatures, while not expressly forbidden by the law, could be a temptation.

c. The maker then fashions a "shrine" for the image. He may not at this point be worshipping the image, but one can sense that he is placing too high a value on it, viewing the mere place for the object as a shrine.

d. Finally, sensing that he should pray to something (and presumably not knowing the true God), he addresses the very thing he has made.

3. The passage increasingly mocks the worship of idols for it involves asking things from something that is helpless.

a. Even in describing the fashioning of idols, the author points out that they are typically made of things (especially wood) that cannot be used for anything else. After all, the premise is that the idols were initially simply art made as a pastime, and one would not use valuable material for that.

b. Furthermore, in verse 16, the passage points out that the idols need a "shrine" lest they fall to the ground.

c. In verses 17 to 19, the passage then dramatically describes the folly by saying that the idolater calls upon: (1) the weak for strength; (2) the dead for life; (3) the mindless for advice; (4) the immobile for help in travel; and (5) the inert for help in commerce and handiwork.

d. This passage is a summary of prior criticisms from, among others, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch and the Psalmist regarding the folly of invoking dead things for help. See Is. 40:18-20, 41:6-7, 44:18-20; Jer. 2:27-28, 10:5; Bar. 7; Ps. 115:4-8, 135:15-19.

4. Then, recalling again the rightful use of wood (and by extension all material) describes the irony of one who has rightfully fashioned a ship of wood then asking the wood that could not be used for a ship for help in sailing.

- Coming back to the theme of God's guidance, the passage points out that even fashioning the ship was an act in

accordance with Wisdom, even though the maker also sought a profit as well.

- The Book of Sirach likewise praised all craftsmen as acting with the wisdom, although not the wisdom of teaching or ruling. See Sir. 38:27-34.

B. The passage then goes on to contrast the guidance that God gives with the trust that people place in wooden idols, a trust that will lead to destruction.

1. The passage begins by describing the sea as created good, and describing how God allows people to learn a passageway through it.

- The sea is often seen as a symbol of chaos, and few Israelis (except those around Galilee) were sailors. See Ps. 18:5, 69:2-3, 74:13-15, 124:4-5. But it was a chaos that God controlled and conquered, as symbolized by Jesus walking on the water. See Is. 27:1, Job 7:12, 26:12; Ps. 89:10-11, 93:3-4; Matt. 14:22-33; Mk. 6:45-52; John 6:16-2.

2. Here, the author wants to emphasize that, despite the dangers, the very ability to discern a passage through the waters is a participation in God's wisdom. There may also be a reflection of the passage through the Red Sea that God provided for His Chosen People. See Ex. 14:21-22; Ps. 77:20; Is. 43:16.

3. Furthermore, the providence of God guides even "one without skill" to safety, for He guides all of His children.

4. There is perhaps an implication that those who have traversed the sea intuitively know that someone guided them, both in knowing about the sea and in traveling through the sea. The Psalmist records this intuition when he speaks of sailors finally calling out to God in the midst of turmoil. See Ps. 107:23-32; see also Jonah 1:5. But, not giving worship to the true God, they attribute this guidance to the works of their hands.

5. As a primary example, the passage describes how God used the wood of Noah's Ark to save the human race as God destroyed the rest of a wicked world.

- The implication is that wood is not only good, but can be very good, if put under God's Wisdom rather than

worshipped for its own sake.

- The passage poignantly summarizes God's use wood by saying that that wood is blessed through which justice comes. The literal meanings would be: (1) blessed in the wood of Noah's ark through which God saved the faithful remnant; and (2) more generally, blessed are those who use such material for good.

- But in light of Jesus Christ, we can see the greater meaning as the blessing God bestowed through the Cross, through which Jesus showed us the greater justice of saving humanity. Here God's mercy makes us just and thus serves the cause of justice by restoring that harmony between man and God that God willed from the beginning. See, e.g., Rom 3:15-5:11; Gal. 2:15-16, 3:7-14; Catechism 1987-97; cf. Catechism 1465.

6. Contrasting God's providence that He works through earthly things is the condemnation of those who make earthly things gods.

a. The passage says that both the idol-maker and the idol are accursed. The idea seems to be that, in misusing an object, one brings an evil even upon that creation of one's hands. In making something a god, one makes it an evil and therefore hateful to God.

b. The passage speaks of a visitation upon idolaters and upon the things they have made gods.

- It is probably the same visitation, but with very opposite effects, as the visitation for the just that will make the just shine with glory. See Wis. 3:7, 13. The time of visitation (often translated as the time of punishment) was a common theme of the prophets. See, e.g. Is. 10:3, Jer. 8:12, 10:15; Hos. 9:7; Mic. 7:4. Jesus and St. Peter will later speak of a time of visitation that involves destruction for those who reject God, but salvation for the just. See Luke 19:44; 1 Peter 2:12.

- The Book of Exodus described God's punishment inflicted upon the Egyptians and their gods. See Ex. 12:12. This passage applies the principle to all idols. One of the punishments for the idolaters is that the things they worshipped will be destroyed precisely because they were worshipped.

c. The reverse implication seems to be that, when the just use created things well, they honor those things and make

them worthy and accepted by God, and thus may bring them beyond judgment and death. Cf. Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes 39 (1965).

C. While there are not the same wooden or crafted idols today, the same warnings against the idolatry of worshipping earthly things (e.g., money, power, pleasure, television, or the state) are applicable. See Col. 3:5; Catechism 2113. Such idolatry involves putting final trust in the things we have created.

III. Verses 12-14 give an introduction to the next two sections by describing the source of idolatry and the effects of sin and death.

A. Verse 12 says that idolatry is the source of wantonness (or fornication, in some versions.)

- The idea is that worshipping a false god is not a harmless error, but leads to other corruptions. St. Paul will pick up on this theme in the Letter to the Romans. See Rom. 1:24-32.

- Verses 22-30 will develop this theme, arguing that, when one does not answer to the true God, all sorts of other sins come in because one believes that good and evil are not rewarded and punished. St. Justin the Martyr likewise argued to the Emperor that Christianity is a force of stability, order and public morals for the Empire because Christians know that they must answer to a just God, unlike the chaotic and often licentious gods of the pagans. See St. Justin the Martyr *Apologia* XII, XV-XVII.

B. Verses 13 and 14 then speak of the beginning of idolatry as vanity, or a corruption in life. The implication is an imaginary view of life, seeing things as they are not.

- Verses 15-21 will develop this theme, giving examples of grief over a child who died young, the desire for the honor of a king far away, and the pleasantness of images made for such purposes. These desires would go terribly astray to result in the worship of the images.

C. Verse 14 then describes the sudden end that will come for the idols and their makers. For, a person will always follow what he worships, and thus the worship of dead things doomed to judgment will lead its followers to death and judgment. See Ps. 115:8, 135:18; Rom. 6:12-23, 8:5-13; Gal. 6:7-9.

- Verses 30 and 31 will pick up on this theme, emphasizing that the dead idols may not execute judgment, but judgment is unavoidable.