

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART XVIII

THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF IDOLATRY

AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE MERCY OF GOD

I. Verses 12 to 21 of chapter 14 then describes some causes of idolatry as proceeding from natural but somewhat faulty desires to very unnatural ends.

A. First, the author describes a father mourning a child who has died young and making an image of him.

1. There is a lack of either the historic Jewish prohibition against making images of people and of the hope described in chapter 3 of this book regarding the resurrection of the dead. And thus the father's production of an image creates a temptation.

2. From a fairly innocent, although ignorant beginning, the father then creates ceremonies and mysteries to surround the image.

- The mysteries are probably secret rites practiced to mourn the dead, or even communicate with them. The latter was gravely contrary to the law of God and punishable by death, for it would open one up to the realm of evil spirits. See, e.g., Lev. 19:28, 31, 20:6, 17. This practice was listed in Deuteronomy as one reason why the nations were driven out before the Israelites. See Duet. 18:10-14. King Saul's attempt to consult Samuel was his last degradation. See 1 Sam. 28.

- The mystery rites were often pagan rites that only the initiates could participate in or even see. The pagan religions often promised that these rites would give everlasting life. The Book of Wisdom presents justice, wisdom and the worship of the true God as the path to everlasting life.

- In the Old Testament, there was little notion of a communion between the living and the dead, although the end of 2 Maccabees does reflect a martyred priest and the prophet Jeremiah praying for their people. It is only with the time of Jesus, that the communion of the saints with the living becomes clearer. See Matt. 17:1-9, 27:51-53; Heb.

12:1; Rev. 5:3, 6:10, 7:9. Before that time, the faithful departed were in the Limbo of the Just and thus not as connected with the living (although there was some connection.) In addition, in the midst of a pagan world, attempts to establish a connection between the living and the dead would more easily go astray.

3. And then the government established this practice by royal decree, and it spread even farther.

- The Books of Daniel and Maccabees record situations where the government tried to suppress Judaism in favor of pagan idols. See, e.g., Dan. 3:1-7; 1 Macc. 1:20-2;48.

B. The passage then proceeds onto a somewhat less sympathetic, but still understandable situation in which people make images of a king far away in order to flatter him.

1. The notion of flattery indicates that even the initial making of the image has falseness to it.

2. The artisan is also vain, for he is motivated by ambition to promote the object he has created.

3. The whole situation is also flawed, for the king is not only vain, but also is so distant that people do not see much of him. It is in contrast to the situation with King David, who delighted personally to be at worship with the people. See 2 Sam. 6.

4. Gradually, the artist's work is done so well that the beauty of the image (which likely makes the ruler look better than reality) draws people to worship the ruler as a god. In Daniel, jealous advisors of the king persuaded the king to have all people address prayers only to him. See Dan. 6:2-29.

- It was the practice of the Egyptians to venerate the Pharaoh as a type of god, associated with Ra, the sun god.

5. Finally, even the image of the ruler becomes an object of worship.

C. This veneration of images brings up a third source of idolatry, i.e., the sense of beauty that can go astray such that people think of the beautiful on earth as the final good. See St. Augustine, Confessions Book X, ch. 27.

- The earthly beauty of art and other fine arts is meant to reflect the creativity of God, but people can go astray in seeing

them as final ends. Cf. Catechism 2501, 2513.

D. Finally, the idolaters convey the "incommunicable Name" upon mere stones.

1. The name of God was so holy that the Second Commandment protects this name and blasphemy was punishable by death. See Lev. 14:10-16.
2. The name of God was a glorious source of protection and joy. See, e.g., Ps. 9:6, 33:21, 72:19; 124:8, 135:1; Joel 3:5.
3. The name Yahweh (I am who Am) was so sacred that, by the first century B.C. only the high priest would pronounce the name, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement when offering sacrifice in the Holy of Holies.
4. Thus, to confer this name upon a mere thing was to put final trust and reverence in the material of the earth.

II. The author then turns to the terrible effects of idolatry, indicating that idolatry has very real worldly consequences and then to the punishment that evil-doers thought they could avoid.

A. Verse 22 sets up the theme that ignorance of God leads to a "great war of ignorance" and those in such a war think it peace.

1. The war of ignorance could be either external violence such as the slaughter of innocents described elsewhere that people deny is really a war, or an internal war of the passions within themselves. In Plato's Republic, Books VII and VIII describes types of cities that are better or worse run, and by analogy different types of characters, going from those at peace because reason reigns to those internally at war because the passions are set loose. The Book of Wisdom has a similar theme, but emphasizes that reason alone is not sufficient; rather, reason points to Wisdom, who points to God.
2. In either case, the intellect becomes darkened to the point that they believe there is nothing wrong, and that the situation is perfectly acceptable.

- Jeremiah and Ezekiel, prophets just before the exile, likewise spoke of a false peace that the people lived in,

thinking that their transgressions against God and neighbor were without effect. See Jer. 6:11-15, 8:10-13; Ez. 13:1-15.

- Aristotle in Nicomachian Ethics likewise said that a person is undisciplined if he knows what is right and wants to do it, but often fails; but he is vicious who pretends that right is wrong and wrong right. Sinfulness can darken the intellect to the point of failing to know right from wrong, and that failure is no excuse for evil. See Catechism 1791, 1793.

3. The rest of the passage will emphasize that the error about God leads to moral ills, for if one does not respect God, one will not respect people created in His image or the laws of nature He has established.

- Hosea had emphasized that idolatry is adultery against God, and thus it leads naturally to sexual misconduct elsewhere. See Hos. 4:4-19. St. Paul later likewise said that, when the nations abandoned God, He allowed them to fall into impurity and violence that they may see the effects of their wantonness. See Rom. 1:24-32; Eph. 4:17-19. He also emphasized that terrible acts are a "work of the flesh," the actions of one who has turned away from the Spirit to the world. See Gal. 5:19-21.

4. The assertion is not that every single person who turns away from a belief in God to worshipping idols will commit these actions, but such behavior will over the course of time follow from them.

B. Verses 23 to 26 then hand down the indictment against the pagan practices.

1. They begin with terrible religious practices, including child sacrifice and frenzied carousals, which probably refers to the fertility rites.

- The clandestine mysteries are probably rites of the mystery religions that may have been done in secret because they could not be tolerated in public. Most of those religions would not permit initiates to say what had happened in

public, and thus many of these rites are unknown to this day. It is thus fundamentally unlike the Jewish worship, parts of which (e.g., sharing the Passover meal) were available only Jews, but which were still well known.

- The Law had warned the Israelites that the nations they were replacing engaged in such practices, and that they were not to replicate them. See, e.g., Lev. 20:1-5; Duet. 18:9-14. It seems that many people thought that, by offering life to the gods, they would win the gods favor; the fertility cults combined offering of themselves in a cult setting to combine with the gods. In all cases, people are taking what is most holy on earth (children and marriage) and giving it to false gods.

2. The indictment then moves onto social practices against marriage and life.

- It follows that if people believe in gods that want killing or sexual worship, they are not going to respect life or marriage either.

- The protection of life and family are at the foundation of society. Thus the attacks against these values are described first of all.

3. The passage then describes in cascading fashion the chaos that results from the initial disorders.

- The prophets had describes such disorders as making the worship of God useless. See, e.g., Is. 1; Jer. 7:1-15; Amos 1:6-16. Here, the passage looks at it from the opposite direction, describing how false worship leads to such disorders.

- Overall, a false view of God leads to a false view of humanity, which in turn leads to a disintegration of society, and thus a true notion of God and man is needed for restoration. In Centissimus Annus, Pope John Paul II described an authentic view of God and of man in the image of God as the most central element in establishing just societies. See Centissimus Annus 55 (1991).

C. In verses 27 and 28, he passage concludes that idol worship is the beginning and end of all evil. The idea is that making things (e.g., physical idols, people, pleasure, power, etc.) into gods is what leads to sin. See Catechism 1849.

1. St. Paul later refers to love of money as the root of all evil, see 1 Tim 6:10, money here likely being the summation of the desire for things of the world. In Colossians, he likewise described evil desires and greed and types of idolatry. See Col. 3:5.

- The idea is that putting other things above God is the source of all sin. Here the passage is dealing with pagan religions that directly describe their gods. But the same principles could be applied to other things that become idols. See Catechism 2113-2114.

2. Verse 28 gives in quick order four reasons why false worship leads to grievous sins and social destruction.

a. First, the lack of restraint in enjoyment leads to madness. Such is obvious in the case of drunkenness or lust, but there is also a sort of madness that comes from taking in too much power, wealth, popularity, and the like. For the excesses cloud the mind, as can be seen in the case of decadent rulers, plutocrats, or celebrities.

b. Second, they prophesy falsely and thus create false expectations.

- The false prophecies could be that there will be rewards for the false worship, and even the terrible pagan practices.

- Or the false prophets may simply be assuring the people that, if they give the false gods proper worship, all will be well.

- The true prophets had condemned the false prophets who assured the people that there would be peace and prosperity. See, e.g., 1 Kings 22; Jer. 5:31, 23:11-32, 27:16-28:17; Ez. 13:2-15. Likewise, the passage says that idolatry has its own false prophets.

c. Third, idolaters live lawlessly. The false gods have no law of their own and thus would not give a law to their followers.

- For the ancient Jews, the law was not just the precepts of the Lord, but an embodiment of overall order of all things coming from God. Thus, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, which the Jews consider

most sacred, are called the Torah, the Law. Thus the Law was a source of delight, for it drew them into the contemplation of the order of God. See, e.g., Ps. 1:2, 19:8; Sir. 39:1-11.

d. Idolaters lightly forswear themselves. Because there is no belief in punishment of honor before God, there is no honesty, no final integrity in keeping oaths and promises.

- This lack of honor and honesty, based upon a belief that there will be no punishment or harm from it, seems to be the basis for all else. The idea may be that, once truth means nothing, all other errors have an easy passage into the mind.

- Jesus describes the connection when He says that whoever belongs to the Father listens to the truth, which sets us free. See John 8:31-32, 47.

D. The author warns, however, the idolater's belief that the gods will not punish him will not protect him from punishment.

1. Justice is here a pursuer, whom the idolaters are fleeing, but cannot escape. Their crimes are based upon two sources.

a. The first source of crime and thus punishment is turning away from God to idols. This notion summarizes the passages above. Over and again, the Wisdom literature describes fear of the Lord as the first stage of Wisdom. See, e.g., Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7, 9:10; Sir. 1:8-17. Likewise, abandoning the Lord leads to folly and destruction.

b. The second source of this crime and punishment is deliberately swearing false oaths.

- The pagans may believe that swearing by a false god does not matter, because they believe the god does not care (or does not exist), but the action is still gravely wrong, and contrary to piety.

- False oaths and perjury by their nature are tied into a false view of God, for they call upon a connection between God, the source of all truth, and falsehood. Thus of their own accord, they must involve a turning away from God. See Catechism 2150-52.

2. The passage points out that swearing by a false god does not excuse the falsity of the statement, for such false oaths are

still contrary to the law of God, and must be punished.

- Justice is again presented as a pursuer who cannot be evaded. The law of God must play itself out. It is a reminder that one can ignore the truth, but never avoid it.

III. Contrasting with the punishment that comes to idolaters is the mercy God will show to those who love Him.

A. The passage begins with a reminder from Exodus that God is slow to anger, true to His covenant, and He shows mercy even in punishment. See, e.g., Ex. 34:6-7; Num. 14:18; Duet. 5:9; Jer. 32:18; Ps. 86:5, 15.

- There is the paradox that God governs all things, and is in control, but does so with mercy, which brings justice to completion by showing the erring the way back. The passages about the plagues, which preceded and followed this commentary emphasize this point that God wishes to bring the sinner back. See, e.g., Wis. 12:2, 29, 16:11.

B. The passage then describes the paradox that God will forgive His people when they sin, but that they will not sin to the degree that they know Him.

1. The two assertions side by side seem contradictory, but the idea is that His people to some degree know Him and, therefore, repent, but do not fully know Him, and therefore, sometimes sin. St. John makes a similar point several times in His first letter, when speaking of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. See 1 John 1:6-10, 2:2-6, 3:4-10, 5:16-21.

2. The idea is that, the more we know God, the more that friendship with Him will keep us from sin, and thus we will come to know God eventually fully, thus excluding all sin. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 3:2. This final knowledge of God is the beatific vision. See, e.g., Matt. 5:8; Catechism 2548-50.

C. Reflecting the positive side of the coin, the author then describes that knowledge of God as the source of all justice and then of immortality.

1. That knowledge brings one into God's might and wisdom, and thus preserves one from sin and death. Jesus would

emphasize this point, saying that eternal life is to know God. See, John 17:3; see also John 1:17; 1 John 5:20.

2. The knowledge of the holiness of God also leads one to repent of sins, seeing them in their true light, and thus receiving the forgiveness and cleansing of God. See, e.g., Is. 6:1-7; Luke 5:8-11.

D. This repentance and knowledge of God is based upon a refusal to be deceived by idols, seeing through them.

- Reflecting again the commentary on idol making from worthless wood and idle time in chapter 13, the author says that the people of God are not deceived by such things of human hands and smeared with various colors. There is a call to live in the truth with a clear-headedness.

- The opposite is a longing based, not upon God, but awakened by idols. The implication is that the true desire for God is asleep, not truly awakened, leaving one open to the longing for dead things.

E. The last passage summarizes the fact that those who put their hopes in things of human hands are worthy of being drawn down to them.

- The condemnation is threefold, beginning with those who make such idols, and then to those who desire them and those who go further and worship them. This conclusion reflects the descent that the passage has describes, from making things for a flawed purpose (e.g., idleness, a desire to be with the dead, the desire to flatter a king) to placing too great a value on them, and finally to worshipping them. Here, as elsewhere, the lesser sins lead to the greater.