

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART XIX

GREED, FOLLY, IDOLATRY AND PUNISHMENT

I. Verses 7 to 14 of chapter 15 condemn in even particularly harsh terms those who make idols for profit.

A. Verses 7 and 8 emphasize that the things of the earth are not themselves the evil, but rather we can make good or evil from them.

1. The emphasis is back on the earlier theme that God created all things good through Wisdom.

2. Thus, verse 7 states that the craftsman makes perfectly good things out of clay, determining its object and use.

3. Verse 8 goes further and points out that humans were made out of clay, reflecting the creation account in Genesis 2:5-7. The prophets would also draw an analogy to the potter, saying that we are as clay in God's hands. See Is. 29:16, 46:9; Jer. 18:1-10; see also Rom. 9:21; 2 Tim. 2:20-21. There is a positive implication here that the legitimate artist participates in God's creative goodness. See Pope John Paul II, Letter to Artists 1-2 (1999).

4. The idol maker, however, fails to realize that he is God's work or art, and that he is, therefore, responsible to Him. The passage here introduces the idea that our life is "lent" to us by God and will be demanded back. The image is that we are servants entrusted with life (and by extension the things of this earth) for a time to make things for God. Jesus will extend this theme in such parables as those of the talents, the coins, rich fool, and the tenants. See Matt. 21:33-42, 25:14-30; Luke 12:16-21; 19:12-27.

B. Verses 9 to 12 focuses on the motives of these idol-makers and their folly.

1. The theme of his ignorance of God and the briefness of life is intertwined with the theme of his motives of pride and greed.

2. Verses 9 and 11 focus on the fact that he does not worry about the briefness of life and does not know His maker.

- These idol-makers would often be honored by the world as sophisticated and worldly wise, as the rich and powerful are now. But the author here focuses on their final ignorance and foolishness in ignoring the obvious, especially regarding where they came from and where they are going.

- The constant reminder of death is, even in the Old Testament, not a morbid reflection, but a call to use life well while we have it and refer all things back to the immortal God. See, e.g., Ps. 49:6-21; Eccl. 12:1-7; Sir. 17:1-18. The Book of Wisdom, like the Books of Maccabees, see things in a more positive light, knowing that death will be followed by the resurrection of the just. See, e.g., Wis. 3-5; 2 Macc. 7; cf. Ez. 37:1-13; Dan. 12:1-3. Here, by ignoring death, the idol-makers are ignoring the final meaning of life.

- On the other side, the idol-makers are also ignoring their origin. Isaiah likewise began his prophecies by pointing out that that the ox and donkey know their owners, but Israel does not know her Lord and Maker. See Is. 1:3. Then, as now, there was a failure to ask first questions of where life and our spirit come from.

- Because of a failure to ask these questions, the idol-maker in the end has no hope, and becomes less than the material of the earth. Isaiah and the psalmist had said that the idolater will become dead, like his idols. Ps. 115:4-8, 135:15-18; Is. 44:18-20. The book of Wisdom says that those who make idols are even worse, for they are deliberately evil.

3. Verse 12 gives the final reason for idol-making, i.e., greed. The implication is that the people who promote these idols know that they are false, but make money from them, and so pretend to worship them. St. Paul likewise faced opposition from those who made idols, and thus senses that Christianity would damage their business. See Acts 19:23-

- The motive, as with the oppressors that chapter 2 spoke of, think of this life as only a time of enjoyment, seeing nothing less, and therefore, simply seek a profit out of it.

- Whether they know it or not, money is their god.

4. Verse 13 thus condemns them as the worst of all, for they deliberately turn to what they know is false.

- They are also worst than all others because they willfully tempt others to sin, thus both multiplying sin and bringing

down other people. See Matt. 5:19, 18:6-7; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:1-2; Catechism 2284-87.

- Interestingly, the passage says that the willful idol-maker sins, not only in making the idols, but also in making other fragile vessels. The latter activity is innocent in itself, but the implication is that the malice of such people taints everything they do and drags it down.

II. Verses 14 to 17 of chapter 15 conclude the section on the condemnation of idolatry and transition back to the commentary on the plagues visited upon the Egyptians.

A. Verse 14 describes them as worse than childish who enslaved God's people.

1. The people who worship idols are childish in their thinking, but those who oppress true worshippers are worse.

2. At one level, this description literally refers back to the Egyptians, whom the next chapters will again describe.

- But, at a deeper level, it can refer to all who oppress the people of God at any time and place.

- And, at a further level, it could refer to those who promote idols, and thus try to enslave the people of God through slavery to idols. As Jesus says, and St. Paul reaffirms, all who sin are slaves of sin. See John 8:34-36; Rom. 6:16-23. The implication is that the promoters of sin are promoting slavery.

B. Verse 15 cross references Psalms 115 and 135 in describing again how foolish idols are, being lifeless.

1. Psalms 115 and 135 celebrate God's guidance of His people against various sorts of oppressors. They both begin with a general praise of God's majesty, then recount His guidance for His people against oppressors, and conclude with a call of all God's people to praise Him together.

2. The emphasis again is on the folly reversing the natural order of man ordering his actions to God, and things serving man. Here man has rejected God and chosen to serve things.

C. Verses 16 and 17 reflect upon the fact that we make only things below us; only God can confer life itself.

1. The passage says that no man can form a god "like himself." The implication is that human beings are, in a sense gods.
2. The idea is that, with humans, there is a element of the divine, and thus we can in a sense be called gods, never to be worshipped, but to be seen as reflecting the Almighty God.

- In several places in the Old Testament, there do seem to be references to people or angels as gods. See, e.g., Ex. 15:11; Ps. 82:5 (referring either to fallen angels or false rulers), 89:7-8, 95:3, 97:7 (translated as angels by Hebrews 1:6), 135:5, 136:2; see also John 10:34.

- Likewise, the Book of Wisdom had described the just as sons of God and friends of God. The idea is that when we turn away from the things below us and look to God above us, we do receive a portion of His life. See Wis. 2:18, 7:27.

3. This passage reflects a positive promise by Jeremiah that one day people would realize that they cannot make gods and will come to knowledge at last. See Jer. 16:19-21. St. Paul picks up on a similar theme, telling the Athenians telling them that they are the sons of God, and should, therefore, not think of God as less than them, but above them. See Acts 17:29.

III. The next passage, from chapter 15, verse 18 to chapter 16, verse 14, concludes the section on the plagues dealing with animals by contrasting God's punishment on the Egyptians with His more merciful disciplining of the Israelites.

A. The section begins with by recalling the theme that the ancient Egyptians (and by extension other idolaters) worshipped not only animals, but particularly disgusting animals.

- This oddity was a theme of the earlier commentary on the Egyptians' worship of animals and fitting punishment by those animals. See Wis. 11:15, 12:24.

- Saying that these animals escaped the approval of God and His blessings is paradoxical in view of the earlier statement that God made all things good. See Wis. 1:14. The statement may be a hyperbole, or could mean that the animals were already taken out of the realm of blessing by being used by tempters, whether human idol makers or fallen angels.

B. The passage then contrasts the deprivation of the Egyptians with the provision of food for the Israelites.

1. The deprivation of food came through animals, such as insects and frogs that the Egyptians worshipped, thus continuing the theme that God punishes through the very things that cause sin.

- The contrast is with animals, here quails, which came to feed the Israelites. Earlier, when the Israelites called for a greater variety of food than the manna, God send quail to feed on. See Ex. 16:4-15; Num. 11:10-15, 31-34. It is apparently the first of these two events that the author primarily refers to, for the second time became more of a punishment for the people's grumbling when a plague broke out as they ate the quail. See also Ps. 78:27-31 (explaining that the plague came because the Israelites wanted more and more.)

- There is an emphasis that God did more than what was necessary to sustain the people, but even gave them quail as an additional blessing for their appetites.

2. The next contrast is between the insects and frogs that made even food revolting to the Egyptians and the delicacy of the quail (and by implication manna) that the Chosen People received.

- The author mentions that the Chosen People suffered want for a short time, but it was in preparation for the blessings they received. The author does leave out the grumbling from the Israelites that preceded the gift of manna and quail. The idea is apparently that the hunger would make the gift all the more valued.

- The implication is that the punishment of loathsomeness from the insects and frogs would hopefully turn to the Egyptians to desire the sweet blessings of the law of God. See, e.g., Ps. 19:10-11; 119:103; Prov. 9:5; Sir. 24:18-20.

3. Third, there is the contrast between the privation of the Egyptians and the lessons learned by the Israelites from these plagues.

C. Verses 5 to 14 then discuss at greater length the contrast between the animals that tormented the Egyptians and the serpent that were sent to punish the Israelites, for the former punishment was not salvific, but the latter was the opportunity for salvation.

1. The analogy is to an event during the Exodus during which the people grumbled against God and God sent seraph

serpents to poison them. But at the prayer of Moses, God provided a remedy in the form of a bronze serpent mounted on a pole, the sight of which would bring curing. See Num. 21:4-9.

- The mounted bronze serpent would later become an image of Jesus on the cross, the image of the effect of sins that brings about their cure. See John 3:14-15.

2. The passage describes these punishments by serpents as only a token punishment to remind them of the law, which was cured soon by God through the vision of the mounted serpent.

- To avoid any implication that mere things can save from the punishment of God, verse 7 does make it clear that God saves and the vision was only a means. It was to avoid this very error, which had led to idolatry that King Hezekiah destroyed that bronze serpent. See 2 Kings 18:4.

- Verse 12 also adds that no medicine cured them either. The author is not criticizing medicine, but indicating that it is inadequate to overcome the effects of sin.

3. The contrast is with the Egyptians who, as verse 9 says, were not healed by their punishments.

- Presumably they could have been cured if they had repented, acting upon the lesson that they saw in God's saving providence.

- Verse 8 indicates that the foes of the Israelites (here Egyptians, but by extension other nations) knew of the event regarding the serpent and saw, at least for the time, the saving power of God.

4. Part of the contrast does seem to be that the Chosen People were basically desirous of being God's people but often had to be reminded of their duties and the call to holiness, whereas their enemies lacked even that desire itself.

- There is perhaps a parallel with the disciples of Jesus, whom Jesus frequently rebuked for their lack of faith and the enemies of Jesus who were not even interested in advancing.

D. Finally, the section ends in verses 13 to 15 by reflecting on God's power and mercy.

1. On the one hand, it describes God's power over life and death, saying that He threatens death and whose hand no one can escape. But it also describes him as guiding people back.
2. This power is contrasted with the anger of man that can destroy, but not restore, life and in general works more often towards malice than conversion.