

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART II

JUSTICE AND WISDOM

- I. The first chapter is a three part introduction to the Book of Wisdom. Each part of the introduction summarizes a part of the book.
 - A. The first five verses summarize the difference between the just and faithful judge on the one hand and the deceitful and foolish man on the other. Chapters 2 to 5 will elaborate on this theme.
 - B. The next two verse praise wisdom, a theme that chapters 6 to 10 will discuss.
 - C. Then verses 8 to 15 describe the punishment due to the wicked, but also on God's desire to save all peoples. Chapters 11-19 will apply this theme to the Exodus.
 - D. In verses 1 and 19 the introduction begins and ends with the theme of justice.
- II. The introduction begins with the theme of contrast between the two ways, one of justice, uprightness, sincerity, which is blessed by God and His wisdom, and the path of deceit an foolishness.
 - A. This contrast between the two ways, similar that that in other wisdom literature, is the controlling principle of the whole book. See also Ps. 1, 14-15; Didache ch. 1.
 - B. The address is to "you who judge the earth."
 - At one level, the book could be to kings, judges and the like, i.e. those in leadership roles. See Ps. 72:1; Sir. 9:17-10:5.
 - But, as the letter will point out, all of the just will judge the world. See Wis. 3:8. This justice restores the primordial order according to which mankind was given authority over the earth. See Gen. 1:26, Ps. 8:7; Wis. 9:2-3. In the parable of the 10 gold coins, Jesus promises that the faithful will rule over the cities of the new creation. See Luke 19:11-27; see also 1 Cor. 6:2-3; Rev. 20:4

C. Justice is the controlling principle of the first 5 verses. This justice is not merely punishing wrong and rewarding goodness, but the whole stability and right relationships between people. See Catechism 1807.

- Justice is a central mark of the messianic reign, connected to the peace, order and indeed friendships of the reign of God. See, e.g., Ps. 45:7, 72:1-14; Is. 11:3-5, 42:1, 45:8-25, 59:17; Jer. 23:3-8.
- Jesus thus establishes this justice by His sacrifice, which brings us into friendship with God. See, e.g., Matt. 5:18-22; Rom. 4:25, 5:21; Gal. 2:21, 3:11; see also James 2:24 (emphasizing the need to cooperate with grace for justification.)
- The book will emphasize this point of justice by showing how God vindicates His people, especially the just man and the Israelites during the Exodus, and how He punishes oppressors, but in a fashion designed to bring them to repentance and thus back to the right relationship with God.

D. The calling begins with a calling to love, think, and seek, reflecting the will (loving), the intellect (thinking), and actions (seeking.)

- The call is not merely to uphold or defend justice, but to love her. There is a calling for a real relationship with justice, not merely upholding an abstract obligation.
- The book then calls for the rulers to "think about the Lord in goodness." The idea is that one should not merely think about the Lord in the abstract, without a connection to the rest of life, but rather in the context of goodness. See Catechism 162. Otherwise, theology become an empty theoretical exercise.
- The book then calls for rulers to seek the Lord "in integrity of heart." There must be a wholeheartedness to seeking God, rather than a division within the person, seeking God with partly, but also seeking to satisfy the world. See Sir. 1:25.

E. The passage continues on with another contrast, i.e. between those who test God and those who believe Him.

1. Those who test God believe in Him only on condition that He satisfy their demands, which is not true faith. See Duet. 6:16; Ps. 95:9; Matt. 4:7.

2. Rather, the book promises, it is when one has unconditionally believed His that God manifests Himself. Perception follows faith or, as St. Anselm would put it, faith seeks understanding and is rewarded. See Catechism 158.

F. The introductory verses then deliver three doublets that give a warning about how one can be separated from God and His wisdom.

1. These doublets are part of a style called parrelelism. Parrelelism is a common feature of Jewish wisdom literature, particularly prominent in the Psalms and Proverbs. It involved repeating the same idea in two successive lines to emphasize the point.

2. The first doublet refers to "perverse counsels" and testing God's power.

- These perverse counsels are the opposite of listening to wisdom, and the testing the opposite of trusting God.
- The focus here is not that God abandons the sinner, but rather the sinner's own thoughts and doubt separate one from God. See Is. 59:1-15.
- Perverse counsels are connected to a lack of trust in God, for it is upsetting the order of things for man to make demands of God. See Luke 9:41.
- More literally perverse means a turning away from the right path or from the truth. See Gal. 1:7; Jer. 3:21.

3. The next doublet refers to the body and soul and wisdom staying away.

- In the soul, there is the plotting of evil because the body is enslaved to sin. St. Paul will develop this theme that sin enslaves the body and thus the flesh overcomes the spirit. See, e.g., Rom. 6:12-14, 7:14-16. The idea is that the plotting person may think himself free from the law, but he is a slave of sin, a slave not free for the wisdom of God.
- Like Hellenistic thought, the book is here distinguishing between the body and spirit and presenting the spirit as the side that should be in charge, but that can be enslaved by the desires of the body. However, unlike much of Platonic thought, there is not the duality between the spirit as good and the body as at best neutral; rather both can be good

or evil.

- Here, the book is beginning the personification of wisdom, which the author will develop later, especially in chapters 6-11. See also Prov. 1:20-33, 8:1-36, 9:1-6; Sir. 24:1-21.
- The couplet turns to the holy spirit of discipline, which is the prerequisite to wisdom. See Prov. 1:1-6; Sir. 2:1-6.
- The couplet is presenting deceit and unwise counsel as something revolting and ugly from which this pure spirit flees.

II. The introduction then turns to a description of Wisdom herself.

A. Continuing on with the personification of Wisdom, the book describes her as a kindly spirit, but one that punishes guilty speech.

- Kindness and punishment of guilt are not contradictory, but rather come together to represent the light of God. As the book will describe punishment may be kind insofar as it can bring about repentance. See Is. 26:10.
- There may here be a contrast with popular society, which at least in Hellenistic world, was not particularly kind and would have considered worldly skepticism praiseworthy.

B. The book switches right from describing Wisdom to describing God, for Wisdom is the perfect representative of God. The emphasis is that God knows all things, and thus there is no escaping His judgment.

1. The book describes three different levels of the person, feelings, decision-making, and action, representing by the kidneys (often translated "inmost self" or "inmost feelings"), the heart and the tongue.
2. The idea may be that a person first feels an emotion or passion, then decides whether to act or not act upon it in the heart, and then carries out this decision in actions, or as here, in words. See Rom. 10:8-10.

C. Verse 7 then describes Wisdom as both filling the whole world and including all things, but also hearing each person's words.

- Wisdom is thus both universal and personal.

IV. Continuing the theme of Wisdom as knowing what each man says, the next eight verses then describe the consequences of sin and sins of speech especially.

A. The first four verses describe with various images the fact that evil speech will always and everywhere be punished. They contain five couplets warning that all speech will be judged.

1. The first couplet begins with a warning that no one (including the most powerful) will get away with wicked speech. The next warning, i.e., that chastising condemnation will not pass him by, may be a reflection of the Passover, during which the angel of death passed by the Israelites, but not the Egyptians.

- The idea is that the type of speech one gives is an indication of whether one is really of member of the Chosen People, whom death passed by, or more like the seeming powerful Egyptian Pharaoh who tried to oppose God and oppress His people.

3. The next couplet, which describes an inquiry into the plans of the unjust and a report made to convict him, gives the impression of God in a sense sending Wisdom as an investigator into the crimes of speech, which people think they are getting away with.

4. The next couplet again harkens back to the Exodus .

- It begins by referring to a "jealous ear" hearing all things. Moses repeatedly warned the Chosen People that the Lord as a jealous God, who tolerates no rivals. See Ex. 20:5, 34:14, Deut. 4:24, 5:9, 6:15, 29:19. Evil speech indicates a division of loyalty between God and the world or some base practice.

- The second half of the couplet continues on with a warning against discordant grumblings. The notion of speech being discordant gives the image of upsetting the harmonious music of a good society. The reference to grumbling evokes images of the Chosen People grumbling against God in the desert after the Exodus, reflecting a lack of faith. Ex. 16:8; Num. 14:36.

5. The next couplet applies these principles telling one both to set a guard against such grumbling speech, treating it as an enemy, and withholding one's tongue from calumny, as from a tempter.

6. These warnings conclude with a more dramatic couplet that begins by the simple warning that even secret words have their effect, although they may seem to be secure. The couplet then raises the stakes by saying that the lying mouth itself slays the soul.

7. As with the letter of James, this introduction may be emphasizing sins of speech because they are so common, so easy, and often applauded by the world. See James 1:19-20, 26, 3:1-12, 5:12.

B. The section then concludes these warnings by another couplet that speaks of erring ways of life and evil deeds as inviting death.

- Once again the image is not so much of an angry God killing the soul, but rather of sin itself causing the death and of a person choosing this death by his actions. See Sir. 15:15-20; Rom. 6:22-23. The death spoke of is the death of the soul, in contrast to the everlasting life that the book speaks of as the reward for the just. See Wis. 3:3-9; Is. 26:11-21.

C. The next two verses then describe God as not wanting the death of anything.

1. There are three couplets, with the conclusion that justice is undying.

2. The first couplet clearly indicates that death is not from God.

- The primary meaning is spiritual death, although it is true that humanity was meant initially never to see even physical death. Catechism 400, 1008.

- In the case of physical death, God did send it to humanity, but more than all else to put a limit to evil. See Gen. 3:22, 6:3, 13.

- Regarding spiritual death, God does not wish it at all, but rather permits it as a result of choosing evil.

- It is true that, outside of humanity, on this earth, there is only physical death. However, even earth is to be renewed and restored at the end of all things. See Is. 66:22; Rom. 8:19-24; Rev. 21:1; Catechism 1047.

3. Emphasizing again the goodness of creation, verse 14 then states that all things are, at their essence wholesome and good. Sin and evil brought corruption to things, but did not eliminate the goodness of their nature.

4. The verse then continues on with the final couplet, which said that there is not a poison among the things of this earth and that Hades has no place here.

- This claim would seem to violate the common sense that there plainly are poisons on this earth and that death clearly is here.

- Once again, the author seems to be tapping into Greek philosophy and distinguishing between the essence of things and the situation they happen to be in, sometimes called the accidents. The essence is good, but the current situation may cause them to have evil effects. See Sir. 16:25-28. And the realm of death has no rightful place on this earth, although things may be called to come to an end in order that something better might replace them. See Catechism 310. That is why it will be expelled at the end of all things on earth. See 1 Cor. 15:20-28; Rev. 20:14.