

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART XX

STORMS AND MANNA, AND DARKNESS AND LIGHT AS SIGNS OF GOD'S POWER AND MERCY

I. From chapter 16, verse 15 to chapter 19, verse 9, the Book of Wisdom focuses on the plagues of weather, darkness, and death that afflicted the Egyptians, contrasting them with the manna, the guidance and mildness of sun and cloud, and the forgiveness and protection that God gave to His people.

A. The plagues referred to are the seventh plague of hail, the ninth plague of darkness, and the tenth plague of the death of the first born. See Ex. 9:13-35, 10:21-12:30. But this section elaborates on the first two plagues by describing the destruction that the hail and resulting fires brought and the terror of the darkness.

B. The punishments are meant to match the sins, with the elements warring against those who failed to honor their Creator, darkness punishing those who enslaved the children of light, and death to those who dealt out death.

C. There is here a very positive portrayal of the Chosen People. The passage on the final plague does present God forgiving their rebellion. But in general the focus is on the salvation and thanksgiving of the Chosen People during the Exodus and journey to the Promised Land.

II. In chapter 16, verses 16 to 29, there is the dramatic contrast between the plague of hail and resulting fire against the Egyptians and the manna for the Israelites.

A. The focus in verse 16 is on the refusal to worship, rather than on the actual injustice or idolatry of the Egyptians.

- Creation is here presented as the servant of God and warring on His behalf for the sake of the just. There is a notion of the order of the universe that the Egyptians have offended.

- Here and later, nature is seen as almost personal, a servant of God fighting on His behalf. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul will later describe nature likewise in personal terms, suffering and seeking redemption. See Rom. 8:19-23.

- Even the miracle of having both intense rain and fire at the same time is seen as an action of the universe, not an overriding of the laws of nature. The idea is that even what seems like an exception to the general order of the universe, such as a miracle, is in fact consistent with its order.

B. The passage adds a notion that the hail sparked fires which cause even more destruction, and the first continued burning despite the rain.

1. Many beasts and crops are destroyed, but there was not total destruction.
2. The lack of total destruction, from the tempering of the flames, preserves beasts, which could either benefit or continue to punish the Egyptians.
3. Thus, even in the midst of punishments, God holds back some of His wrath in an attempt to bring the people to know and worship Him.

C. The contrast with the storms is the manna from heaven, which is here called "the bread of angels.

1. The passage emphasizes the universe giving the Chosen People bread without labor, in reversal of the punishment of Adam that the earth would bring forth thorns and thistles. See Gen. 3:17-18.
2. Verse 21 even adds the notion that the manna changed to suit each person's taste. The idea is that, like the rains from heaven and the grace of God, the manna was the same in itself yet produced a different effect in each person. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:1-26; Eph. 4:11-16.
 - The passage does not mention it, but it is ironic that many of the Chosen People became tired of the manna, presumably because their desire for God had also waned. See Num. 11:4-6, 21:5.
3. In Exodus and Leviticus, manna is described as "like hoarfrost" and (in the Septuagint translation) "with the appearance of ice." See Ex. 16:14; Num. 11:7.
 - The manna lasted exactly long enough for the people to gather enough for the next day, or two days on the day

before the Sabbath. The amount that was not needed each day would disappear. See Ex. 16:21. (Or if the Israelites tried to keep it for longer than the day prescribed, it would be eaten by worms. See Ex. 16:20.)

- The book picks up on this description to contrast the manna, which is like ice that melts when and only when it is no longer needed with the fire that was not quenched by the hail and rain that plagued the Egyptians. Again the universe acts in an orderly fashion; it is humans that act for or against this order and, accordingly prosper or are punished.

- Here the universe is ordered to benefit the people of God.

4. The description of the manna as the bread of angels is most likely based upon verse 24 of Psalm 78, which described the manna as the bread from heaven.

- That psalm, however, reflects heavily on how ungrateful and unfaithful the people often were. The Book of Wisdom, especially here, portrays the gratitude and prayers of the Chosen People. The notion is growing here that being a member of the People of God is not so much a matter of nationality as a question of whether one is just and faithful to God. Cf. Matt. 3:9; John 8:39; Rom. 8:7-9. The ungrateful people described in the psalm would be associated with the Egyptians whom the Book of Wisdom condemns, while now even the Egyptians can be among the just, among God's people, if they worship the true God.

5. Jesus and (most likely) the Book of Revelation will later compare the Eucharist to the manna in the desert, and Christian theology will now call the Eucharist the bread of angels. See John 6:32-33; Rev. 2:17; Catechism 1331.; St. Thomas Aquinas, Panis Angelicus

6. The passage concludes with the theme that it is the creative word of God that provides all else and that we must be continually thankful to Him.

- That the "sons of God" might learn this lesson is first reason for all of these events, both the punishment for the Egyptians and the providence for the Chosen People. Like the miracles of Jesus, the events of the Exodus (and by extension all of God's saving work) are meant as a lesson for all ages. All of Scripture is meant, not only as history, but also as guidance for all people. See 2 Tim. 3:16.; Catechism 116-117.

- The forces of nature here respond in dramatic fashion to the saving will of God that people may see in them the hand of God and give rightful worship to Him. As Jesus will say later, man lives not by bread alone, but by every word of God. See Matt. 4:4.
- The manna is given for a time so that people may give God thanks for His providence, but more than one day's manna (or two to carry through the Sabbath) was not allowed so that people may not forget to give thanks to God. The passage warns that the hope of the ungrateful is passing like the frost or running water.

III. Chapter 17 and the first four verses of chapter 18 then contrast the darkness sent upon the Egyptians with the guidance of light and the mildness of the sun for the Chosen People.

A. The first three verses of chapter 17 describe the reason why this judgment was just and fitting.

1. The first reason was that they tried to keep in slavery the holy nation as exiles in a foreign land. Because of this confinement, they deserved to be confined in darkness, exiled from the light of heaven.
 - Verse 4 of chapter 18 reiterates this theme, saying that it was through the Chosen People that the light of the law was to be given; and so those who tried to keep this light hidden deserved to be in physical darkness, a sign of their spiritual darkness. The positive message is that all peoples are meant to share in the light of the law; and thus that the readers should see themselves as heirs of God's providence to the Israelites.

2. The second reason is that they tried to keep sins hidden from God, preferring the darkness. Cf. John 3:19-21; Eph. 5:8-13. As a result, darkness was their reward.

B. Verses 5 to 13 then describe in terrible fashion the effects of the darkness.

1. The darkness is not merely an absence of feeling, sight or abilities, but rather a chance for all of their guilt and fears to come back to haunt them.
 - Verses 5 to 8 describe a number of apparitions and phantoms that appeared to them. Spectral fires also appeared

to them, filling them with fear.

- Ironically, the magicians who seemed so powerful, and who were able to conjure up such tricks, now are impotent against the appearances in the darkness.

2. Verses 9 and 10 make it clear that the fears and appearances came, not from any reality outside of themselves, but rather from their own guilt. Cf. Prov. 28:1.

- The idea is that, when the light of the world and above all the light of God are withdrawn, the fears that come from guilt rise up and terrify one.

3. Verses 11 to 13 then draw the lesson that guilt leads to fear and thus to its own condemnation.

- It begins by saying that guilt both makes one afraid of oneself and makes one unable to deal with misfortune. Here, the Bible for the first time uses the word syneidesis as a term for "conscience." The idea here is that, deep in the human heart, there is an undeniable sense of right and wrong that people may flee from but can never completely extinguish. Cf. Rom. 2:15.

- Here, the conscience ignored comes back in the darkness to condemn the accuser. Going in the opposite direction, the First Letter of Peter speaks of the joy of those who suffer because of their knowledge (syneidesis) of God. See 1 Pet. 2:19. St. Paul likewise appeals to the people's conscience, that is, their intuitive knowledge of right and wrong, to recognize the truth of the Gospel. See 2 Cor. 4:2, 5:11.

- Verses 12 and 13 describe how this fear abandons reason and allows the vagueness of the future to be terrifying. By contrast, reason enables one to bear the injuries of the world for the sake of the good, and finally for the author of all goodness. The shame of fear is meant to be a very negative image to an increasingly Hellenized world that prided itself on its intellectual accomplishments.

- Likewise, in the modern world, the separation of reason from faith has in turn led to even to a common abandonment that there is any truth for reason to pursue and thus to a sense of nothingness. See *Fides et Ratio* 45-46; cf. Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes 36-37.

C. Verses 14 to 21 then give further images of the darkness as a conquering enemy of the Egyptians and all those opposed to God.

1. Verses 14 and 15 describe how powerless the darkness is in itself, but how the fear that comes from guilt made it powerful and able to conquer the Egyptians.

- There is no sense here that it was demons who tormented the Egyptians, but rather simple nothingness, for that nothingness allowed their own fears to terrorize them.

- The idea of weakness is meant to shake the powerful into a sense of shame.

2. Verses 16, 17 and the first half of 18 then describe the darkness as a sort of prison sentence that the people were given together.

- Immediately, this reference is to the Egyptians who were all together cast into darkness, with social distinctions no longer of any consequence. Jesus will later use prison as an analogy to hell for those who refuse forgiveness to others. See Matt. 18:21-35; Luke 12:57-59

- In a more universal sense, the people who will be subject to imprisonment to darkness could mean anyone who joins with the Egyptians in trying to imprison the word of God and stifle those who promulgate. The prison of darkness and fear is their reward. As the Book of Wisdom said earlier, the just will rise to judge the unjust. See Wis. 5:1-2.

3. Verses 18 an 19 then describe how all sounds merge together in a chorus of terror in that darkness of guilt.

- The injustice and refusal to abide by the law of God does not liberate one or make one more open to different views, but rather makes all sounds, whether pleasant, neutral, or dangerous, sound as one.

- Here, there is no direct description of God's call for the Egyptians to repent. However, the theme that all sounds becoming terrifying may remind the reader of the punishment God had said would come upon the Chosen People if

they turned from Him. They would be carried off into exile, and the survivors would be afraid even of the rustle of leaves. See Lev. 26:27-39. However, that passage is followed by a description of the repentance that the exiles would then see their way to. See Lev. 26:40-45. The implication here may be that that darkness and fear (whether of the Egyptians or of those later acting like them) would lead them to repentance.

4. Verses 20 and 21 conclude with the image of the light over the whole world, while Egypt was in darkness as a warning.

- The physical darkness and resulting fear is described as "an image of the darkness that next should come upon them." The implication is that even the terrible darkness and resulting terrors was a warning of the never-ending darkness and fear that comes from rejecting God. Jesus would sometimes describe hell as being case into the darkness outside. Matt. 22:13; 25:30.

D. The next few verses then turn to the bright fortunes of the Israelites.

1. First, the light of the Israelites seemed even greater in contrast to the darkness of the Egyptians and made the Israelites their master.

- One gets the impression of majestic power on the part of the Chosen People that is not exercised to punish. The Chosen People thus receive the pleading and thanks from their former masters. It is an image of the power they are to receive even more as time goes on.

2. In contrast to the Egyptians who were in darkness, the Chosen People receive two special privileges. First, a column of cloud by day and fire by night to guided them to the Promised Land. See Ex. 13:21-22; Num. 9:15-23. Second, on the way, the sun, which would usually be oppressive in the desert, became mild. The idea again is that nature is orderly for those in tune with the will of God.