

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – SECTION III

THE UNJUST AND THEIR PACT WITH DEATH

I. Chapter 1 ends with a dramatic switch over to the attitude of the wicked, who paradoxically seek death. Verse 16 describes with increasing intensity to deal of "ungodly" with death.

A. It first states that they themselves summoned death.

- The reference could be to Adam and Eve, but they were not the paradigms of the ungodly and, in fact, seem to have repented. See Gen. 4:1, 25.

- It seems more that the wicked in general invite death into their lives and the world. God had told the Chosen People long ago that they faced a choice between prosperity with Him and destruction by disobeying Him. See Duet. 11:26-28, 30:19. The Book of Wisdom now says that the unjust in general have made a choice of destruction. See also Sir. 15:16-27.

B. But the book then goes further and says that the ungodly considered death a friend.

- The reference could be to two things. First, the ungodly use death as a means to their ends, in this case considering the death of the just their friend, as with the death of the prophets.

- But also there is a notion that death itself is a friend of the unjust for it puts a limit on things and thus at least appears to allow one to avoid any notion of the timeless or the infinite. See Benedict XVI, *Spes Salvifici* 11-12 (2007.)

C. The book even says that the ungodly pine for death (or pine away with love for death.) The idea is could be that, at the core of all sin is a certain sadness, a self-destruction, and a hatred of the true self that God wishes to bring forth, and thus a desire for its death.

D. Finally, the verse says that the wicked have made a covenant with death.

- There is a dramatic contrast between this covenant with death and the live-giving and glorifying covenant that God has

made with the Chosen People. See Gen. 15, 17, Ex. 19, 24; Joshua 24. Covenants were given to Noah, Abraham, Moses, and King David. The Covenant had been broken by the Chosen People through infidelity, but God promised a new and glorious covenant that would bring the peoples of the world before God. See, e.g., Is. 42:1-9; 54:9-55:13; Jer. 31:31-40; Ez. 36-37. Jesus would establish this new and everlasting covenant through His sacrifice on Calvary, His Resurrection, and the Eucharist. See Matt 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 9.

- The glory of this Covenant with God, which makes people His own, is paralleled by the terrible effects of the covenant with death that the wicked make, which makes them death's people.

E. The argument is not that the wicked think about this effect, but rather that their words and deeds bring about this effect and make them worthy of it.

II. The book then describes the attitude of the ungodly by quoting what the ungodly really mean, even if they do not say it.

A. The chapter is quoting what the ungodly say to themselves, not to the world. Thus, the author is saying that, while the ungodly may justify their actions in many ways, their behavior is really based upon this notion that life is meaningless.

B. The first five verses express this notion of the meaninglessness of life in different ways and through different images.

1. First, there is the overall statement that this life is short and sorrowful and that there is no cure for death.

- The assumption is that, whether there is life after death, it has nothing to do with this life.

- The author emphasizes that we have no witnesses who have come back from death to tell us what it is like (if anything) after this life. Reason and Revelation as ways of knowing are rejected by the wicked.

- Job likewise presents man's life as drudgery and temporality, but still places his appeal before God. See Job 7, 14.

- Likewise, the Psalms generally did not express any particular hope of everlasting life, but accepted death as inevitable and simply asked God for a sense of His peace. See Ps. 39, 90. There was also a sense that God directed

the whole nation and, through them and one's own descendants, one's future was secured. See Ps. 102:27-28; 144.

- Likewise, the Book of Ecclesiastes describes issue of death and the author's lack of knowledge of what would come. See, e.g., Eccl. 3:16-22, 8:5-9:6. The author recommends, however, innocent enjoyment of the gifts God has given. See, e.g., Eccl. 9:7-10, 11:9-12:1.

2. Here, however, the wicked attribute nothing to God, but rather say that all people come about by mere chance, a view espoused by secular philosophies from Epicurianism to the modern atheistic version of Darwinism.

3. Likewise, the wicked say that their lives have no lasting impact. The Wisdom literature would agree that the wicked have no lasting impact, but proclaim also that God ensures the continuing influence of the just. See, e.g., Sir. 44:9-Ps. 102:27-29; compare with Job 18; see also Obad 15-21. Some of the wisdom literature did question whether future generations would remember the just. See Eccl. 1:11, 2:16. But even here again the solution is to accept all the good God does give and rejoice in it. See Eccl. 2:24-26

4. The wicked take the image of the human soul as fire, giving smoke (the image for human breath) as evidence of itself to the world. That fire has a certain time to burn, until the human life, its fuel, is exhausted. And then, the wicked believe, it vanishes.

- The wicked are picking up upon a common image of the human spirit to fire, which rises from the earth to heaven, but here in a very pessimistic way.

- The Psalms also portrayed man's breath as like that of smoke, but there drew the conclusion that as a result, we should put our trust in God alone. See, e.g., Ps. 39:6, 62:10, 144:4; See also James 4:14 (drawing the conclusion that this life must be offered to God and that we should rely on Him alone.)

- Likewise, the wicked portray this life as like the clouds or the mist that vanishes in the day and the light of time. The second letter of Peter and the Letter of Jude use similar analogies for the wicked, those that are controlled by passing desires, but in the context of awaiting a greater homeland. See 1 Peter 2:17, 3:8-10, 12; Jude 13.

5. Oddly, the wicked seem to take a certain comfort in this pessimism, thinking that there is no consequence to their

actions either.

C. Thus, the second part of the speech calls for the enjoyment of good things. But unlike Ecclesiastes, there is a sense here of excess, having the fill of costly wines and perfumes, and enjoying every springtime blossom and leaving no place free from signs of wantonness. One is not, as the Psalmist recommends, enjoying the work of one's hands, but rather looking for opportunities for enjoyment at every opportunity, apparently in idleness. Compare with Ps. 128:2

- The wanton treatment of the meadows and lands contrasts with the more idyllic scenes of the fruitful fields, mountains, or city of the messianic kingdom. See Ps. 23; Is. 11:6-11, 65:21-25; Ez. 47:8-12; Mic. 4:4; Zec. 3:10; Rev. 21:10-23.
- The unjust here have no sense of the lands as a gift or an entrustment, or having a value in itself; and there is certainly no sense of an enjoyment of the lands by other peoples. Rather, all its value is measured by the enjoyment people gain from it for a certain time. This view contrasts with the more objective view of the city of God, or the green pastures of the Messianic kingdom, which have a value in themselves that is to be enjoyed by all of God's people. Cf. Spes Salvifici 14.

III. In the second half of their speech, the ungodly then turn against the innocent because they are in the way and the just man because he bothers their conscience.

A. First, the unjust state that they will have no problem oppressing the poor, the widow, and the aged, because they act in accordance with the principle that might is the law.

- The wicked here are using the reasoning of Thrasymachus in his debate with Socrates as described by Plato in The Republic. Thrasymachus basically adopts the Sophist principle that justice is nothing more or less than the laws that the strong establish for their own advantage. Thus, he argues as do the unjust here, might makes right. See Plato, The Republic Book I 338c-339a. Such reasoning has also been taken up by the likes of nominalists, Social Darwinists, and utilitarianism. It is based upon a principle that there is no law not created by humans.

- The statements of the unjust are in direct opposition to the law given during the Exodus. See Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:32, 25:35-37.

B. Then the unjust plot against the just man because he represents righteousness and thus opposes them.

1. These statements are an elaboration of the plans of the unjust in Proverbs, see Prov. 1:10, and a general reflection of the plots against the prophets. See, e.g., Jer. 20:1-16, 26:1-19; Amos 7:11-13; Matt. 23:37. And it is a first hint of the opposition that will develop against Jesus.

2. First, the unjust say they are infuriated that the just man is obnoxious to them and opposes them. Then, they specifically say that the just man accuses them of opposing both the law in general and their own background.

- The opposition could be a direct attempt to stop them by force or by persuading others not to join. Or it could be that the just man simply reminds them of their own injustice, as the discourse will soon describe.

3. They state that the just man calls himself a child of God. In an older time, angels, the kings or the whole country of Israel could be called a child of God. See, e.g., Ex. 4:22; Duet. 14:1, 32:5-6; 2 Sam. 7:8-16; Job 1:6, 2:1; Ps. 2; Is. 30:1, 9; Hos. 11:1. Here, however, as with Sirach, the just man in general is a child of God. See Sir. 23:4, 51:10.

- The Book of Wisdom thus reflects a beginning understanding that we are each called to be children of God. Jesus will pick up on that theme, allowing us adopted sonship. See, e.g., Matt. 5:16, 48, 16:4, 8, 15, 18, 32; John 1:12; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:4-7.

4. The speech of the wicked indicates that the example of the just man bothers their own conscience.

- Instead of the law of God, the wish to establish their own law of decadent behavior, and punish the just because they are not like everyone else.

- The implication is that evil cannot tolerate the very existence of the just. They wish to establish evil as their own norm.

- There is a reflection of the persecution of the Chosen People, and later the Christians, by the pagans, on the grounds that the Christians are not like other peoples. See Eth. 3:8; Dan. 6.

5. The wicked are also angry at the fact that the just will not associate with them. One would think, given what they have

just said, that the unjust would not like the company of the just anyway. But there is a desire on the part of the ungodly for a sense of approval by the just.

- The argument that the "last end of the righteous is happy" bothers the unjust, for it constitutes a nagging doubt about their end.

6. The unjust thus say to themselves that, if the just man really is favored by God, God will protect him.

- These words reflect the torment of the just by the unjust in Psalm 22, and especially verses 8 and 9. Psalm 109 also recounts the plea of the just that God show the unjust that He is supporting the just man. Both psalms will end in a note of triumph, as the Book of Wisdom will show the triumph of the just.

- And again on the cross, Jesus quotes Psalm 22, and the crowds jeer Him in a similar fashion as the unjust jeer the just man in this speech. See Matt. 27:41-46; Mk. 15:31-34; Luke 24:35-37.

7. Overall, the unjust are plotting against the just, who seems very much to be in the image of the suffering servant Isaiah describes. See Is. 42:1-7, 52:13-53:12.

8. The unjust are seeking to justify themselves and their persecution of the just by presenting it as a test of righteousness. They reason to themselves that, if the just man is right, their persecution will not harm him. And, if he is not right, there will be no consequences to them the wicked.

- Behind all of the reasoning is that unease, however, there is a vague feeling that somewhere there is a retribution after all.

IV. The chapter concludes by describing that flaw in their reasoning.

A. The chapter begins by saying that it was the very wickedness of the unjust that led them astray. Thus, the ignorance is not an excuse, nor is it without effect. It is not God's fault, it is the result of their own choice to live in darkness. See Job 24:13-17; John 3:19-21; see also Eph. 5:6-14.

B. The book describes this blindness in three ways.

1. First, the unjust, because they have chosen the darkness, cannot know the secret purposes of God.

- The author is beginning to indicate that God has a reason for allowing the just to suffer for a time, a plan he will begin to describe in chapter 3. God reveals the mystery of God to His People, but the wicked are left in ignorance. See Matt 13:11; Mk. 4:11; Luke 8:10; 1 Cor. 2:6-16.

2. These purposes involve paying "the wages of holiness." The idea is that all of the innocent suffering in this life can in a sense be considered earning an everlasting prize. St. Paul will later say that the wages of sin is death. But he will describe everlasting life as the "gift of God." Rom. 6:23. Part of the idea is that we cannot really earn holiness or everlasting life on our own, but Jesus, by His free grace, allows us to do so by living as His disciples.

3. Likewise, the passage describes the prize for blameless souls. It was only the blameless who could enter God's presence. See Ps. 15; Ps. 119:1-4. The problem is that no one is really blameless. See Ps. 14. It is Jesus who allows us to attain to that purity of heart and soul that allows us to win this contest of earthly life and thus win that prize. See 1 Cor. 9:25; James 1:12; Rev. 2:10, 3:11.

C. The book then wraps up this section by referring to the theme it introduced at the beginning, the choice between life and death.

1. The author says that God has from the very beginning given us everlasting life, for we are in His image, and He is immortal. See Gen. 1:26. The question is whether we forfeit this gift.

2. The passage then presents envy as the motive that the devil had, and by extension tempters in general have, for causing sin, that in turn brings about death.

3. In referring to the creation and Fall, which are not particularly common subjects in the Old Testament, the author is calling for the reader to go back to the beginning of all wisdom and all creation, getting a picture of the whole of human history. The rest of the book will describe a way of viewing that history.

D. The passage concludes dramatically by presenting the alternative between being in the part of the devil, which leads to death,

or being in the hands of God, leading to the everlasting life of which the next chapter will speak.