

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART V

THE REWARD OF FIDELITY

I. The book then turns to the contrast between the childless who are righteous and the unrighteous who have many children.

A. In the Old Testament, many children were considered one of the central blessings. See, e.g., Gen. 12:2; Duet. 28:10; Ps. 127:3-5, 128:3-4, 144:12-14; cf. Is. 53:10-11.

1. As a result, those who were childless, starting with Abraham, desperately wanted at least one child. See, e.g., Gen. 15:3, 29:15-30:24; Judges 13:2-5; 1Sam. 1:4-24; Luke 1:7, 13.

2. There were several famous episodes in which who were righteous and childless were generally rewarded with one glorious child, such as Isaac, Samson, Samuel, or John the Baptist or with more than one child, as with Rachael. See also Is. 54:1-8 (the restored Israel will be like a formerly barren child who is fruitful again.)

3. Isaiah had prophesied that, in the new messianic kingdom, even the childless will be greatly blessed and receive a place and name in the new and glorious house of the Lord, a blessing greater than children. Is. 56:1-5. And likewise, the Book of Sirach had spoken of the fact that the wisdom of a ruler is a great blessing that leads effectively to many children, while wicked children and no blessing at all. See Sir. 16:1-4.

4. These verses pick up on this theme and try to elaborate on the theme that children are a blessing only to the virtuous, and that the virtuous without children have other blessings.

B. The structure of this section begins with verse 12, which connects this discourse to the by continuing on with the theme that the wicked have no hope for the future. This continues the theme of verses 10 and 11, which focused on the vanity and hopelessness of the wicked and those who despise wisdom.

- It emphasizes that, while they may have children, that will not be a source or hope for their wives will be foolish and their children wicked.

- The cursing of three or four generations was considered a punishment for sin in the Old Testament. See Duet. 5;0, 18:18.
- On the other hand, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had prophesied that in the new and messianic kingdom, people would be rewarded for their own virtues and vices. See Jer. 31:29-30; Ez. 18:1-20.
- The meaning here does not seem to be that the children are punished for their parents' foolishness by being evil, but rather than on the whole a foolish man will tend to marry a foolish woman and together raise foolish children.

II. The rest of the discussion is structured in a sort of sandwich form. It continues on with the theme of true fruitfulness with agricultural images in chapter 3, verses 13-15 and chapter 4, verses 3-5, with an emphasis on the importance of reputation in between.

A. The passage begins by discussing the blessings to the righteous childless woman and the eunuch.

1. The pure woman who is childless will "bear fruit" at the "visitation of souls.

- The purity could mean faithfulness to her husband and/or not being impure in other ways, such as using artificial means of contraception.
- The transgression of the marriage bed could mean unfaithfulness.
- But it could also mean having intercourse at forbidden times. See, e.g., Lev. 15:4, 18:19.
- Artificial contraception was virtually unknown to the Israelites, who valued children highly, except for the case of Onan, who was struck dead for the sin. See Gen. 38:6-10. However, in the pagan cultures surrounding Israel, such things were sometimes done. And thus the book, written in Alexandria, may have been subtly commenting on such practices, saying that the woman who is childless through no fault of her one will be blessed.
- Isaiah has prophesied that the barren nation would again be fruitful. Here, the promise is extended to the individual woman and also applied othe afterlife.

- Children were considered to be the fruit of the womb. See, e.g., Gen. 1:28, Duet. 28:4, 30:9; Ps. 127:3. Thus, the bearing of fruit at the visitation is a replacement for children. Exactly what that fruit would be is left ambiguous, probably because until the time of Christ it really could not be known.

- The reward will be at the visitation of souls. The time of visitation is a term of art for when the Lord will come. In the Old Testament, it tended to be associated with punishment, but here as with verse 7, it is a time of blessing for the just. See Is. 10:3, Jer. 8:12; Micah 7:4; Hos. 9:7; see also Luke 19:44. There is a specific reference here to the visitation of souls, which could mean either when the future king comes to visit souls (as Jesus did after His death on the Cross) or the time in which the souls of the just return to earth to judge it. See Wis. 3:8, 1 Cor. 6:2; Matt. 19:28.

2. The passage then turns to the blessings of "eunuchs" which could mean either men incapable of sexual relations or infertile for other reasons.

- In a time of worse medicine, infertility would have been greater, and thus the issue more common.

- In addition, while castration was not done among the Jews, it was sometimes done among the pagans for a variety of reasons. As a result, addressing the issue of eunuchs would have been more likely for a writer in Egypt, as the author of Wisdom probably was.

- The assumption here is again that the eunuch has been righteous in thought and deed.

- There is a promise of "fidelity's choice reward" and a "heritage in the Lord's temple." The author is probably cross referencing Isaiah's prophesy about the rewards given in the messianic kingdom.

- However, here there seems to be more of a notion that the just will be rewarded in the heavenly temple. There is thus a reversal for the prohibition on eunuchs ministering in the temple. See Duet. 23:2.

- There may be also some notion that, as the Levites had no one land of their own, but were instead given the special role as ministers of the Lord, so here those who cannot have families are promised as special role in the worship in heaven. See Duet. 18:1-4; Matt. 19:12.

3. Wrapping up the image, the book goes on to say that noble struggles themselves produce great fruit and understanding lasts forever.

- The idea is that children are a blessing, but then so are the benefits God will give forever to those who are faithful. See 2 Macc. 7:9, 14, 23.

- The permanence of the blessings of understanding could refer to the fact that one's immortal soul is forever perfected by understanding, or to the fact that understanding confers lasting benefits to the world. See Sir. 16:4. The image of the root of understanding is that the tree of one's life will stand if the roots are sunk deep, as is the case for the man of understanding. See Prov. 12:3, 12.

B. The passage then switches over to a comparison between the disgraceful progeny of the wicked and the permanent good memory of the just.

1. The emphasis here is again purity, with the transgressors adulterer or people who have otherwise violated the laws of purity (possibly by unlawful marriages.)

2. The first comment is that, even with those who do have children, their children will tend to die out and the line will fail anyway.

- The science was not known at the time, but it would certainly be the case that marriages between close relatives, common among the pagan nobility, but forbidden among the Jews, does tend to lead to defects.

- When David had an affair with Bathsheba, the child died shortly after birth. See 2 Sam. 12:14. This passage is arguing that, even if the children of adultery live a long time, they will still be dishonored.

Likewise, Sirach describes the public disgrace that comes from adultery. See Sir. 23:22-27. But here there is an implication that even if one gets away with it (either because it is unknown or because a pagan society accepts it) there will be grave consequences later.

3. The second punishment is that they (which could be the sinners or their children) will enjoy no esteem and will be dishonored if they do live a long time.

4. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the unrighteous, regardless of how many children they have, have no sense of hope to them. See Sir. 16:1-3.

5. By contrast, the childless who are virtuous will be remembered by both God and man forever. See Prov. 10:7

- The Book of Sirach and the Letter to the Hebrews contain hymns of praise for the virtuous near the end. See Sir. 44:1-50:24; Heb. 11:1-12:1. The idea is that it is their great witness and deeds that is celebrated.

- The idea is that the virtuous are honored when they are on earth and missed afterward. The earlier passages in chapter 2 indicated, as did the lives of the prophets, that the virtuous can also suffer because of the persecution of the wicked. But even that persecution involves a recognition of the witness of the righteous.

6. There is a concluding image of the triumphant procession of the virtue itself. One gets the image of a crown of glory given to the virtues themselves and to those who have adopted them.

- There may be an implication that, if the unjust do have children who are just and wise, those children will be in a sense adopted by the virtues themselves, or by the virtuous, at the time of visitation, that they may share the glory together.

C. The passage then goes back to the images of fruitfulness and trees, this time in describing the wicked and their lack of progeny.

1. There is a lack of rootedness, leading to easy destruction during the storms of life. The image is of a seemingly fresh and fruitful tree suddenly destroyed by a blast. Cf. Is. 14:30; Matt 7: 24-27; Compare with Is. 11:10, 37:31.

2. There is also the image of fruit and twigs broken off before their time. The idea may be that the children of the unjust will leave their parents' instructions early, following their parents' departure from wisdom. And thus the children, while meant eventually to leave the home, will do so too quickly and be like unripe fruit, useless for anything.

3. The passage concludes by saying that children, when examined, give evidence if they were born of an unlawful union.

- That unlawful union may have been adulterous. The idea here is that the adultery cannot be hidden, for it will be reflected eventually in the children, either in appearance or in behavior.
- The unlawful union may also be a wrongful marriage. The idea here is that the children will tend to turn out badly, giving witness to the fact that the couple never should have married.

III. These passages do not themselves comment on the voluntary celibacy that the New Testament recommends, but set the stage for it.

A. The blessings promised here for the childless do not themselves come from being childless, but rather from virtue and steadfastness.

- The passages themselves do not comment on whether a virtuous childless person is more or less blessed than the virtuous family.

B. However, precisely by indicating that the childless, and by extension, the unmarried can share fully in the blessings of God, and by pointing toward a greater kingdom, this passage creates an atmosphere in which celibacy can be seen as a state of life God calls one to.

- Up to this point, among the heroic figures of the Old Testament, only Jeremiah had intentionally remained unmarried. See Jer. 16:1-18
- There was a notion that one had to refrain from conjugal relations just before offering sacrifices and that temporary celibacy was a form of consecration. See Lev. 15:18; 1 Sam. 21:6. However, the idea of voluntarily renouncing marriage for the sake of the kingdom was almost unheard of until the Essenes began that practice for the fully initiate.
- Celibacy was more common among the pagans, but often for the wrong reasons. First, there could be a tendency to arrogance and looking down on the commitments of marriage as unworthy of one, as in the case of the Greek goddesses Athena and Diana. Second, there could be a Gnostic tendency to reject marriage on the grounds that the material world is

evil.

- Thus, God may have been guiding the Israelites slowly on this front to avoid these errors until nearly the time of Jesus, when He would give the real reason for celibacy, i.e., advancing the kingdom of God.

C. By the time of Jesus, the notion of celibacy was accepted enough that John the Baptist was unmarried in order to be consecrated to God and no one seemed to think it unusual. (He may have at one time been affiliated with the Essenes, but by the time of his ministry as recorded in the Gospels, he was too open to the public and even pagan soldiers to be an Essene.)

D. Likewise, when Jesus begins to preach about celibacy, the first instinct came from His disciples. See Matt. 19:10. And, despite the fact that He had numerous enemies, criticizing the fact that Jesus was unmarried did not occur to them.

E. Thus, with passages such as this one in Wisdom, there was a cultural shift in Jewish thought that prepared the way for the teaching of Jesus (and St. Paul, see 1 Cor. 7:8-9, 27, 32) in praise of celibacy for the sake of promoting the kingdom of God.