

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART VII

FINAL MEETING OF THE JUST AND THEIR OPPRESSORS

I. The book now completes the reflection on the contrast between the just and the unjust with a description of the final judgment between them.

A. The first two verses describe the dramatic return of the just, now in strength, to the unjust, who tremble before them.

- The scene dramatizes the reversal of fortune that God's justice brings about. See, e.g., 1 Thess. 1:6-10.

- Here, it is the very sight of the just in glory that punishes the wicked, in part because of the reward that the unjust have now failed. As with the Book of Daniel and later the Gospels and the Book of Revelation, there is a final judgment. See Dan. 7:9-27; Matt. 24:29-25:46; Rev. 20:11-21:8. But here even the presence of the just is a part of the judgment. See also Ps. 1:5, 23:5.

B. The remainder of the chapter then describes their different fates in two parts.

1. In verses 3 to 13, the unjust oppressors express their fate in their own words through their speech of fruitless regret. There and in the concluding verse 14, the emphasis is on the darkness and nothingness into which they descend.

2. In verses 15 to 23, the chapter then describes the reward of the just in terms of a glorious crown of victory and being on the victorious side in the battle against evil and chaos.

II. The unjust give a despairing speech that describes their errors, but without repentance.

A. The unjust recognize their errors and regret them, but the emphasis is primarily on themselves.

1. The unjust speak among themselves, not to others. There is still an isolation, a failure to turn to God or even to the just. The speech is thus similar to that of the unjust in Isaiah 59:9-15 and the merchants in Revelation 18:10-17.

2. There is a dramatic contrast with the repentant sinners who speak with God or His representatives. See 2 Sam. 2:17; Dan. 4:31-34; Luke 15:21, 23:40-43. The Psalms of repentance are consistently addressed to God, asking him for help, rather than focused on the self. See, e.g., Ps. 6, 38, 51. It is confession of sins to God and asking Him for forgiveness, not mere regret at sin or its punishment, that leads to reconciliation. See Ps. 32:3-5.

B. This speech is the counterpoise to the speech in chapter 2 and proceeds in reverse order to that speech.

1. The speech in chapter 2 describes: (1) first, in verses 1-5, the transitory nature of life and various images for it, such as that of a brief spark and ashes, a cloud, mist, and a shadow; (2) second, in verses 6-11, the intention of the wicked to enjoy life in wantonness, selfishness and injustice on the ground that all is temporary anyway; and (3) the intention of the wicked to persecute the just because his example angers them.

2. This speech then describes: (1) first, in verses 3-5, how the just man, who was mocked, now is in glory; (2) second, in verses 6-7, how they, the unjust, have in fact lived outside of the light and true land; and (3) in verses 8-13, how their lives are transient, as they said they were in the original speech.

C. The unjust first see in shock the glory of the one they mocked.

1. There is a three-fold expression of ruefulness, groaning and anguish of spirit. It is the opposite of the anguish taking flight at the beginning of the reign of the new king. See Is. 8:22-9:1.

2. The wicked recognize that they mocked the just one and laughed at him, but now the fortunes are reversed. There may be a reflection of Psalm 22 and the just one mocked, but who will triumph. See Ps. 22:8; cf. Ps. 109:25. The people usually mocked the prophets, only to realize their wisdom after the punishment came. See, e.g., Hos. 9:7. Here the unjust realize the wisdom of the just, but now too late for any repentance.

- The scene at Jesus' crucifixion reflects this mockery and laughter at the final Just One. See Matt. 27:27-31; Mk. 15:16-20; see also Mk. 10:33-34.

3. They had also thought him a fool because of the seemingly dishonored death he suffered, but now realize the real situation.

- The book is building upon a common saying, "Consider no man happy until his death." Here the book is saying that even the death of the just man is not the final standard.

- St. Paul will pick up on this theme, saying that the wisdom of God destroys the wisdom of this world. See 1 Cor. 1:18-31.

3. Now they realize that they just man is among the sons of God and among the holy ones of God.

- The term son of God had before been applied to the patriarchs, angels, kings, and sometimes the whole people 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. Now it is clear that each one of the just is a son of God. See Sir. 23:1, 4, 51:10 (expressing the need for discipline from God and the fact that He will deliver the just.) As the New Testament makes clear, it is through Jesus Christ that we achieve the justice that makes us adopted sons of God. John 1:12; Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 4:1-7.

- Likewise, as the Chosen People were the holy people of God, and as the ark of the Covenant was the holy place of God, see Ex. 19:6, 26:33; Lev. 11:44; Duet. 7:1-6; Ps. 2:6, 5:8, 11:4; Is. 6:14, 64:10, now each of the just is holy one, set aside for God. Before, an angel, a prophet, or one especially set aside by God was considered holy. See, e.g., Josh. 24:19; 2 Kings 4:9; Tobit 11:14; Ps. 89:6; Dan. 9:17. Now it is clear that each one of the just is so. This is a theme that St. Paul will also pick up on, saying each one of the faithful is a holy one of God. See Rom. 16:2; 1 Cor. 3:17; Eph. 2:21; 5:3; Col. 1:12.

D. The unjust then realize the errors of their ways.

- There is an image of the wicked now realizing their blindness in not seeing the light of righteousness and instead wandering astray through the paths of lawlessness and chaos to the desert.

- The discourse combines three common images together: (1) the image of the light of God and darkness away from Him; (2) the theme of the two paths, one of righteousness and the other of folly; and (3) the contrast between the lush fruitful land of the glorious people of God with the desert of the unrighteous. The light of God allows one to walk along the path of wisdom to that fruitful land. Cf. Ps. 1, 23. The darkness away from God by contrast leads people astray into the

deserted wilderness. Cf. Prov. 1:18-33.

E. The wicked then describe the transitory nature of all of the things they put such great hopes in with four images. See Job 7:7, 9:25-26

1. The first is the image of a shadow. There may be some reference to the Platonic idea of this world as one of shadows seen only in the dimmest light in a cave, as compared to the full reality outside. Psalm 144 had used a similar image, but in the context of a wonder that God had given such glory to transient man. See Ps. 144:4.

2. The second image is that of a ship which either leaves forever or sinks. In either case, the sea, the symbol of instability, takes over and nothing is left.

3. The third image is of a bird, departing, never to be seen again. There is again a despairing image from philosophy of the spirit as like a bird that soars over the earth. But all the wicked can see in the image is transience, for they have not the permanence to keep this spirit. See Hos. 9:11.

4. The fourth image is the wind created by an arrow, gone as soon as the arrow passes. There is a play on words, for the Hebrew word for spirit and wind is ruah. But here the wicked think only of the impermanence of the earthly wind, not of the spirit of heaven of which it is a sign.

F. The speech of the wicked then reflects recognition that their own wickedness is what led to this impermanence.

- There is a gory image of their own sins consuming them. The idea is that, for one who has chosen vice, the vice takes him over. Cf. John 8:34; Rom. 6:16-17.

- The implication is that the wicked realize now that they did not have to be impermanent. It is their own sins that caused this result.

G. The author then concludes by saying that the hope of the wicked is in fact transient, like the thistledown (or chaff), mist, foam, and the passing memory. There is a reflection of the contrast in Isaiah, portrayed the wicked as the roaring of the seas, but

becoming as mists, while the word of God stands firm. See Is. 18:12-13.

1. At one level, this could be restating what the wicked themselves said, i.e., that all their hopes were in vanishing things that are now gone..
2. But the author is saying, not only that they are passing, but that their hope even in impermanence will be disappointed. For the just do not share their fate (as they hoped he would) and they, the unjust, still suffer regret, rather than nothingness. The reversal of fortunes destroys their hopes and punishes them.

III. Then the chapter turns to the just, first in terms of the blessings they receive, then in terms of the combat they are victorious in.

A. First, the chapter presents five blessings for the just. The blessings seem to cross reference the prophecies of Isaiah often.

1. As with the blessings of the suffering just described at the beginning of chapter 3, the first blessing is living forever. This blessing is in stark contrast for the transitory nature of the wicked. God had promised of old that the line of David and the new Israel would last forever. See, e.g., 1 Sam. 7:16; Is. 66:22. Here the just inherit that promise with them.
2. Second, their "reward is with the Lord." That phrase comes from the prophecies of Isaiah about the new and glorious kingdom. See Is. 40:10, 62:11. Both deal with the restoration of Israel and in particular Jerusalem after a time of exile and suffering. The first prophesy in particular begins with a reflection upon the contrast between humanity as like transient grass and the word of God as lasting forever.
 - The implication is that the just man is like a new Jerusalem, a holy place blessed and loved by God forever. Cf. 1 Cor 3:16, 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21.
3. The third blessing is that the thought of the just (or care of them) is with the Most High. The idea is that God cares immensely for them. Isaiah had prophesied that the new Israel would be called the Beloved, Delight and Espoused of God. See Is. 62:4-5, 11. Here the just are again described as that new beloved people of God.
4. The fourth blessing is that the just will receive a crown and a diadem from the Lord.

- This is likely a cross reference to the prophecy of Isaiah that, even when the northern and southern kingdoms fall, God will be a glorious crown and diadem for the faithful. See Is. 28:5. The idea there is that God will be their king when their earthly kings have failed. But here there is also the promise that the just themselves will share in that kingship. See Prov. 4:9; Dan. 7:18, 27.

- As with the description of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs, there is a sense of both the majesty of the kingship and yet the equity of its glory being available to all people who are willing to be just. See, e.g., Prov. 7:4-9:10.

5. The final blessing is that God Himself will be their protector.

- God had promised to uphold Israel with His right hand and arm. See Is. 41:10, 13. Likewise, the psalmist had often called upon the Lord to protect him with His right hand. See, e.g., Ps. 17:7, 18:36, 44:4, 45:5, 139:10. This promise combines the two images together as the just are protected by God and are His new Chosen People.

- This blessing leads into the next part of the chapter, which describes God as protecting the just against the travails of the world and attacks of the wicked.

B. The chapter then switches over to martial imagery, describing God and the just as armed against the wicked and as the whole universe doing battle against the wicked in a colossal contest that will destroy the world, but paradoxically vindicate true creation.

1. First, there is an image of "he" taking on armor of zeal, the breastplate of justice, the helmet of sure judgment, shield of rectitude, and the sword of righteous anger.

- The most obvious reference is that God would take on such things in doing battle with the wicked. Isaiah gives a similar image when he says that God will take on the armor and weapons of righteousness and salvation Himself because there was no one left to serve Him. See Is. 59:16-17.

- The image may also be of the just taking on this armor and weapons (or more accurately being given them by God) to take on the world. St. Paul will take up this image in the letter to the Ephesians and, to a lesser extent, the letter to the Romans and the first letter to the Thessalonians. See Rom. 13:12, Eph. 6:11-17, 1 Thess. 5:8.

- Part of the symbolism is that the zealotry for God, righteousness, justice, and holiness are as armor, a breastplate, a helmet and a shield that turn back the attacks of the wicked. Wickedness can physically attack the just, but cannot destroy those realities, as St. Paul's letters indicate. More on the advance, the righteous anger of God (and His people) cut down the wicked. See Heb. 4:12.

- The contrast is, as with David against Goliath, between the power, but limited power, of earthly weapons, with the cosmic power of the weapons of God. See 1 Sam. 17:45.

2. All of creation now wars against the unjust, with the forces of nature, such as lightning, hail, and storms, wrecking havoc on the wicked.

- There is a reflection of the plagues that God sent to Egypt to free His people. See Ex. 7:14-12:40. In the latter half of the book, the author will give a greater reflection on the theme of these plagues.

- In general, nature would often come to the help of God's people against the wicked or the enemies of God. See, e.g., Gen. 8; Josh. 10:11; 1 Kings 18. Here, this theme is brought together in the context of a colossal struggle.

- The idea could be that God will bring about great natural catastrophes in a miraculous fashion to put an end to the wicked, as with the plagues of Egypt. Or it could be that, when natural catastrophes happen, as they can be expected to, the plans of the wicked are put to flight. Both orders, nature and miracles, are under God's control. Nature is not just a phenomenon that occurs by chance, but is under God's control.

- In this new order, instead of nature trembling at God, as it had done of old, see Ex. 19:18; 2 Sam. 22:8; Ps. 18:8, 46:7, 68:8; Is. 29:6, now nature is raging on God's behalf, presumably in preparation for the messianic kingdom where man and nature will be at peace.

C. The description of the conflict concludes by saying that it is the wicked who will destroy the prosperity of the earth by their misconduct.

- Part of the idea is that the catastrophes that occur on earth may come because of the conflict between wickedness and the holiness of God, but they should be blamed on the wicked.

