

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – PART IX

THE DESIRE FOR WISDOM

(CHAPTER 6, VERSE 22 TO CHAPTER 7, VERSE 12)

I. The second main part of the book, which continues from chapter 6, verse 22 through chapter 10, describes: (1) the author's desire for wisdom and eagerness to share her; and (2) the nature of wisdom and the advantage of loving her.

A. Starting in this part of the book, the author takes on the persona of Solomon, who prayed for wisdom and thus was greatly blessed. See 1 Kings 3:1-15. Similarly, Wisdom is portrayed as a beloved woman and a queen, whom Solomon loves and takes guidance from. In this case, there is no exclusivity, however. She must be shared with others.

- She is thus like the queen mother in ancient Israel, who was more powerful and honored than the king's wife or wives. See, e.g., 1 Kings 2:19; 2 Kings 11:1-16. The authors of 1 and 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, which record the kingdom of Israel from Solomon onwards, almost always name the mothers of the kings of Judah. However, it should be noted that, in the case of earthly queen mothers, like earthly kings, they did not always use their power well. See 1 Kings 15:13.

- In the light of the New Testament, the analogy may be more to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who was present at the beginning of the new creation, as Wisdom was present at the founding of the primordial creation.

- Given that wisdom is associated with love, the image of Lady Wisdom can also be applied to the virtue of love.

B. The overall structure is that there is: (1) an introduction; (2) a description of Solomon (in the first person) seeking and sharing wisdom; (3) a prayer of Solomon for wisdom and reflection on the many advantages of having her; and (4) a transitional section that introduces the workings of wisdom in history.

1. The introduction in chapter 6, verses 22-25, declares the overall intention for the rest of the book for the sharing of wisdom, for wisdom desires to be shared and lead to a well governed world.

2. The next section, which covers chapters 7 and 8, portrays Solomon as making a speech in which he describes his own

pursuit of wisdom and her nature. The speech appears to be in a chiasmic form, with the glory of wisdom in the center.

- a. The first subsection, which consists of chapter 7, verses 1-6, describes Solomon's common human origin, avoiding any notion that he is fundamentally different from the rest of the human race.
- b. The second subsection, which consists of chapter 7, verses 7-12, describes how Solomon preferred wisdom to all else, and how he came to realize that she governs all good things.
- c. The third subsection, which consists of chapter 7, verses 13-22, describes how Solomon wants to share wisdom and let others share in the understanding that she has provided to him.
- d. The fourth subsection, which consists of chapter 7, verse 22 to chapter 8, verse 1, stands at the center and proclaims the glory of Wisdom in herself as above all of the created world and having such a goodness and beauty that evil and decay cannot affect her.
- e. The fifth subsection, which consists of chapter 8, verses 2-8, again describes Solomon's love for Wisdom, now as a husband for his bride. Like the third subsection this commentary declares the many advantages of having wisdom. The focus here is on the fact that she is and will be the fulfillment of all desire for glory, virtue, and intelligence.
- f. The sixth subsection, which consists of chapter 8, verses 10-18, again describes how much Solomon desires and will desire wisdom and how she will make him glorious. The theme is similar to the second subsection, except now the focus is on the present and future.
- g. The seventh subsection, which consists of chapter 8, verses 19-21, again describes Solomon's lot when he began seeking wisdom. Here, he does refer to the advantages he had of a good upbringing and a pure body but also emphasizes again that even so all his wisdom came from God. This subsection introduces the prayer that is chapter 9.

3. Chapter 9 begins Solomon's prayer which, in a way, continues throughout the book. The prayer in chapter 9 is basically in three subsections of six verses each. This chapter, and perhaps the rest of the book, can be seen as an elaboration on

Solomon's prayer for wisdom near the beginning of his reign. See 1 Kings 3:6-9; 2 Chron. 1:8-10.

- a. In the first part of the prayer, Solomon calls upon God and asks for wisdom, recognizing his need for guidance. The focus here is on the governance of the whole world.
- b. In the second part, Solomon reflects upon his calling as the new king and builder of the Temple and asks for wisdom that he may carry out these roles well. The focus here is on governance, both civil and religious.
- c. In the third part, Solomon reflects upon the need for all people to have wisdom in order to understand divine things, because of flaws and weaknesses in our thinking. The focus here is on the things of heaven.

4. Then, chapter 10 serves as the transition to the next half of the book, which reflects especially on God's providence during the Exodus and upon the general difference between idolatry and the true worship of God.

- a. In the first 14 verses, the chapter describes how Wisdom guided Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Jacob, and Joseph, summarizing the early history recorded in Genesis in her light.
- b. Then, from verse 15 to Chapter 11, verse 1, this passage introduces the next part of the book by describing how wisdom guided Moses and the whole people of God as they were freed from slavery in Egypt.

II. The introduction describes Solomon's intention for the book and the motives for disclosing Wisdom.

A. The passage begins with an extraordinarily bold claim, that the author can say where wisdom is from.

1. Wisdom was considered both by Jews and Gentiles to be very difficult to track down, of mysterious origins. See, e.g., Job. 28:20-24.

2. There is a rejection of keeping secrets with regard to wisdom.

- In the book of Tobit, the archangel Raphael had pointed out that, in political affairs, keeping secrets may be helpful, but not in the realm of God. See, e.g., Tobit 12:7.

- There was a strong notion in the Old Testament that only the righteous could really understand the secrets of God. See, e.g., Ps. 25:14; Prov. 3:19-21; Is. 48:14-19; Dan. 2:22-23. They were kept secret, not out of envy, but because only those could understand who are ready. Jesus likewise said that he wanted the light of God to shine on all people, but that His followers should not cast pearls before swine. See Matt. 5:14-16, 7:6. He said that, through the parables, many secrets were revealed, but only to those who were friends of Christ. See Mark 4:10-12; cf. John 15:15.
- The author, therefore, sets forth to reveal the secret origin (arche genesis) of wisdom.
- He also resolves not to depart from the truth, possibly a criticism of the tendency to set aside what is true for what sounds clever.

B. The author says clearly that true wisdom will not reside with those who jealously guard her.

1. There is likely here a criticism of mystery religions and Gnostic sects that believed in a secret knowledge available only to the few, and whose adherents seemed to delight in having knowledge unavailable to others.

- In the secular realm, having secrets may give one an advantage. But here the idea is much more that, if one keeps Wisdom to oneself, she will leave.
- Many Gnostic sects did portray Wisdom as a woman, but as one who is not sullied with created the mere material world and who can be attained only by rejecting this world as evil and sharing in a secret knowledge. See New Jerome Biblical Commentary 80:64-65.
- The portrayal here is of Lady Wisdom active in the world, eager to be available to all peoples if they will only seek her. See also Prov. 8: 1-9:11. And thus her followers likewise must seek to share her.

2. James will later say that that envy and rivalries come from an earthly or even false wisdom. See Jam. 3:14-16.

C. The author then gives a more specific reason for sharing knowledge, i.e. that it leads to a better world, both because more wise people in general leads to a better world, and because a wise ruler in particular provides well for his people.

1. Wisdom literature had referred to the need for wise rulers that the people may prosper. See Prov. 11:14, 24:3-6; Sir. 9:17-10:5.
2. The implication is that there is a duty both to Wisdom herself and to society to share this wisdom. And there is thus a duty to Wisdom and society to learn.

III. Solomon then begins the main part of his discourse by describing his own humble beginnings.

A. There is an emphasis that he was born like others, descended from Adam and subject to death.

1. The 10 months in the womb probably refers to lunar months of four weeks each, from one full moon to another.
2. Then there is a message that all kings are in the same condition. There is no special birth that uniquely qualifies them to be wise.
3. There is a positive message here, i.e., that a humble birth is no barrier to wisdom, for all come from the same stock.

B. This message stands in stark contrast to an idea of a superior birth, or a preservation of bloodlines as being critical.

1. In pagan mythology, the heroes were commonly related to the gods. Both the Greeks and Romans, for example, traced their origins from one who had a god for a father, and thus claimed an exalted status.
2. It was likely common to intermarry among single family in order to preserve the royal blood.
3. The message here is that there is no exalted bloodline that gave Solomon his great wisdom. It was rather that he sought after her with dedication.

C. This message combines both the humility and glory the wisdom literature in the Old Testament regarding man. First, on the side of humility, there is the principle that all people, including the most powerful, are subject to ignorance and death. See, e.g., 1 Kings 2:2; Ps. 49:14-21; Eccl. 5:12-16; Sir. 14:17-19, 40:1-17; But, on the positive side, there is also the message that, despite humanity's lowliness, God still cares for us and has given us access to divine wisdom. See Ps. 8, 144:3-10.

- The message is that one should not take pride in a high birth, nor despair in a lowly one, but seek wisdom in all things.

IV. The next six verses then elaborates on the account in 1 Kings 3 and 2 Chronicles 2 regarding Solomon's prayer for wisdom above all else.

A. In those passages, God told Solomon near the beginning of his reign to make a request and it would be granted. Solomon asked for wisdom that he may lead the people well. God praised Solomon for this choice and told him that, because he had asked for wisdom rather than a lesser gift, such as power, glory, the life of his enemies or long life for himself, he would receive wisdom and also the other positive gifts.

- Noteworthy, long life was promised only on the condition that Solomon keep the commandments, and the gift of being able to take the life of enemies was not given. See 1 Kings 3:13-14; 2 Chron. 1:12.

B. Verse 7 describes a certain progress toward wisdom. The first step is prayer for wisdom, and then the attainment of prudence. It is prudence that then leads to the prayer for Wisdom, which is then given.

- Thus, it seems that the first desire is for prayer in general and then for prudence. It is when prudence is given that the desire for Wisdom seems to awaken.

- Prudence is a virtue, described shortly thereafter in the Book of Wisdom, that gives one the ability to discern calmly what to do. See Prov. 14:17, 15:5, 19:14; Wis. 8:6. It is one the way to wisdom, but a lesser virtue and cannot alone bring one into right relationship with God if the greater virtue is not there. See, e.g., Is. 29:14.

C. Solomon lists one by one various things he holds of infinitely less value than wisdom.

1. First, power, i.e., scepter and throne, are considered lesser than her. It is an irony, which the author does not note, that Solomon, by his folly in taking foreign wives and their idols, caused the throne to be divided. See 1 Kings 11; Prov. 47:19-22.

2. Second, wealth, both in gold and gems is rejected in favor of her. They are of lesser beauty and/or can purchase things

of only transient value, as the grains of the seas, washed away over time.

3. Third, health and good looks are lesser than her.

4. Finally, she is preferred to "the light." This term could refer either to delight in life, compare Ps. 97:11; Micah 7:8-9 with Amos 5:18-20, or to life itself, compare Ps. 49:29, 56:14, Job 33:30 with Ps. 88:7-13; Job. 38:17.

- The idea is that Wisdom is eternal, while these things, while good, are in the end, only temporary.

D. This passage concludes by saying that all good things came along with Wisdom.

1. The things that Solomon preferred to Wisdom were themselves good, but lesser than Wisdom. And so Solomon can receive them again, as long as he puts her first.

- His joy in them is rightfully based upon referring them all back to Wisdom.

2. Solomon does concede at the end that he did not know at first that Wisdom was the rightful leader and mother of all other good things.

- Thus, it was presumably his prayer and general willingness to do God's will that led him until he understood her importance.

E. Jesus will take up the theme and bring it further when He says that, if one will sacrifice all things to Him and His kingdom, they will all be given back again, albeit likely in a different form. See, e.g., Matt. 6:33; Mark 10:28-31.

- The theme is taken a step further, from merely valuing all good things as less than Wisdom and accepting her as their guide, now to a joyful sacrifice of all things to Christ from the queen of virtues, love.