

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – SECTION VI

LIFE AS A TIME OF GROWTH

I. The book now responds to the paradox that the just often die young and the unjust live at length.

A. A long life was one of the blessings promised to the just in the Old Testament. See, e.g., Ex. 20:12; Duet.30:15, 20; Ps. 23, 91:16; Prov. 3:2, 16-18; Sir. 15:17.

B. The idea was not only to have more days to enjoy life on earth. Even more, the idea was that a full life allowed one to arrive at greater perfection, experiencing all of the portions of life, from the strength of young years to the wisdom of age, from the delights of young learning to the ability to see one's children and grandchildren. See Prov. 20:29; Ps. 128. Death was considered a cutting off of the fullness of life, and granting long life a fulfillment. See, e.g., Prov. 9:1-6, 11; Is. 38:10-20. By contrast, one can give God more glory with a full life, during which one can witness to the faith for future generations. See, e.g., Ps. 40:1-4, 61:5-9, 88:11-13; Is. 38:19-20.

C. Thus, Isaiah prophesies that, in the messianic era, all people will live out their full lives, and even more. See, e.g., Is. 65:17-25.

D. By contrast, early death was a punishment for the unjust.

- Death itself, and then the limited lifespan of most people, was a response to sin, to keep it limited. See, e.g., Gen. 1:19, 22, 6:3.

- And, likewise, early death was a punishment for an unrighteous life, for an individual or a nation. See, e.g., Duet. 4:25-26; 30:19; Ps. 28:3, 55:24; Prov. 9:13-18.

E. The question, therefore, is why some of the just die young and many of the unjust live long lives.

- As Ezekiel had prophesied, certainly an unjust man who was repentant may be given longer life, in part to improve again. And a formerly just man who became unjust may die as punishment for the injustice. See Ez. 18:21-32.

- There would have been many of the just who were known to have died young, such as King Saul's son and David's good friend, Jonathan, and the King Josiah, who died because of the wickedness of others. See 1 Sam. 31:2; 1 Kings 23:29-30; see also 2 Macc. 7. Likewise, some of the particularly unjust, such as King Manasseh, the grandfather of Josiah, had lived basically a full length of life. See 2 Kings 21; see also Dan. 13:52. The question was why God allowed that to happen.

- Isaiah had very briefly said that the dead just man may be forgotten by men, but is at peace with God, see Is. 57:1-2, but had not elaborated on this theme. This section of the book of Wisdom seeks to do so.

II. The first half of the section on early death describes why God may allow the just to die early. The book focuses on the goal of perfection, rather than on long life in itself.

A. First, the author points out, as Isaiah did, that the just one who dies early is at rest. The implication is that the unjust after death are not at rest. See Ps. 49:15; Is. 66:24.

- The section does not elaborate on this theme, for the first part of chapter 3 already discusses the rewards for the just after death.

- Instead, the section describes why God would allow the just to die early, instead of allowing them to grow in perfection.

B. The first answer is that understanding and purification is the goal of life, not mere length of years. Long years are merely an end to that goal.

1. At one level, the author is simply reminding people that life has a goal, i.e., becoming wiser and more virtuous, growing in understanding and holiness. Mere length of years alone is useless unless it accomplishes these goals.

- The Book of Proverbs had said that grey hairs (meaning age) were a crown of glory. See Prov. 16:30. But here the book indicates that more important are the understanding and contemplation that can come from age. See. Ps. 27:4-6.

- Likewise, the "unsullied life," a life a virtue was the hope for end of a long life. The hope was that, the longer one

lived, the more time one would have to purify one's life of sin and become more able to worship God properly. Here the book points out again that it is the virtuous life, not the length of years needed to attain it, that is important. See Ps. 84:11-13. Compare with Dan. 13:52.

2. At another level, the passage states not only that the achievement of understanding and the pure life achieve the goals of old age, but in some sense, are length of years in themselves.

- The idea may be that, when one has understanding and purity, one is brought into the timeless realm and thus experiences the length of years even now. See Ps. 15, 22:23-27; 24:3-6.

C. The next, and more lengthy answer, is that God wanted to protect the just, lest the wicked corrupt them.

1. The passage states that the just who die young are specifically loved by God and was taken up by God to a better place.

- There may be a reference to Enoch, who lived a relatively short life, compared to the other early patriarchs, and who did not die but "was taken up by God." See Gen. 5:21-24; Sir. Heb. 11:5. His life was 365 years, as compared to the lives in excess of 800 years for most of the rest of the early patriarchs. But that number created a neat balance, 365 years of 365 days each.

- There may also be a reference to Elijah, who was taken up in a fiery chariot. See 2 Kings 2:9-12. It is not clear how old he was, but he appeared to be taken up into heaven sometime in middle age. His ministry in prophesy was probably somewhere between about 15 and 24 years, beginning during the twenty-two year reign of Ahab and apparently ending during the two year reign of his son and successor Ahaziah.

- The implication is that, like Enoch and Elijah, the just have not so much perished, as have been brought into a glorious realm, from which they will return again in glory. See, e.g., Mal. 4:5-6; Sir. 44:16; 48:10-12; Mark 6:14-15, 8:27-28; Heb. 11:5-6.

2. The motive is in part that God does not want any longer to risk the corruption of the just by being in the midst of the unjust.

- The Book of Deuteronomy had warned of the potential for the nation to become corrupt through prosperity and the influence of other nations, and the likes of Solomon exemplified this potential. See Duet. 8:6-20; 1 Kings 11:1-10; see also Ez. 18:24.

- One sees here the imagery of God setting the just free of the traps of the wicked in a different light. The Psalms especially had described how God preserves the life of the just from the plots of the wicked in terms of wild animals preserved from snares. See Ps. 9:16, 31:5, 91:3, 110:110, 124:7, 140:6. Here, the book paradoxically presents even death as saving the just from the snares of evil.

3. The passage contrasts the shadows and storms of evil in this world (witchery of evil things and swirl of desire) with the calmness of a realm beyond.

- The book says that evil often makes it difficult to perceive the good and to maintain innocence. See Dan. 13:9. The phrase "whirl of desire" is apparently a new one that the author coined. It is meant to give the impression of instability in this world.

- The book is presenting this world as a kind of testing ground of fighting against evil. Through these tests, the person that stays with God finds that his soul has become "pleasing to the Lord." That phrase is language used for sacrifices or praises that are fitted for God. See Ps. 39:32; 104:34; Ezra 6:10, Hag. 1:8; compare with Is. 1:11-14. The idea is that the lives of the just are as a sacrifice or song fitted for the Lord. See Dan. 3:38-40; Heb. 13:15; 1 Pet. 2:9.

- The image is then of a promotion to a higher realm, as a hero come back from battle or from some great quest, now at peace with God. The images reflect King David's song of thanksgiving in 2 Sam. 22:5-20.

III. The book then turns to the vain reasoning of the ignorant people that leads them to death.

A. The passage says that the general public saw and did not understand, fulfilling the prophesy of Isaiah that the people would hear the voice of prophesy and not understand it, see but know nothing until after the destruction comes. See Is. 6:9; see also Matt. 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10. Only in the new messianic era after the suffering will the peoples see God's providence

in the light of His glory. See Is. 60:1-4, 62:1.

- The next line, which is not in some texts, explains that what the people do not see is that "God's grace and mercy are with His elect, and he watches over His holy ones." That line repeats the phrase in chapter 3, verse 9, which concluded the list of blessings given to the just who suffer for God. The idea is that the same blessings are given to those who die early.

B. Also referring back to the reference in chapter 3 to the just judging nations, the book says that the just man who has died condemns the living and the youth who died young the elderly wicked.

- Part of the idea is that the holiness attained in short time makes the folly of those who have failed to advance in many years more obvious. The light of God shows forth the ugliness of sin that would rather fade into obscurity. See John 3:19-21. In a similar way, Jesus says that the repentance of those who did not have the revelation of God will, on the day of judgment, condemn those who did not repent despite having this revelation. See Matt. 12:38-42.

C. Referring back to the folly of the wicked described in chapter 2 and chapter 3, verses 2-3, the book says that the wicked do not see what becomes of the just.

1. The unjust believe they are being clever, but in fact act out of a colossal blindness.

- In ancient Alexandria, as with the modern world, the skeptics would have thought of themselves as above the common beliefs of mankind, or of the simple devout people. And there may well have been a temptation for Jews among the upper and educated classes of Alexandria, and the Hellenistic world generally to compromise on the faith in order to seem learned. This chapter is saying that it is the worldlings who are ignorant and blind.

2. Likewise, the passage evokes the images of the wicked scoffing at the wicked, not realizing how foolish they look in the eyes of heaven.

- The description of God scoffing at the wicked could be a reference to the messianic psalm 2, which describes the Lord's anointed (messiah in Hebrew) putting the wicked to shame. See Ps. 2:4.

- But, given the context of contrasting the permanent life of the just one with the destruction in store for the unjust, it

more likely it is cross referencing the wisdom psalm 37. See Ps. 37:13. That psalm describes the permanent protection and providence God gives to the just, described especially in terms of inheriting the land, in contrast with the ephemeral prosperity of the wicked. Combined with this passage in the Book of Wisdom, the implication is that that land is greater even than the Promised Land on earth. It is an inheritance in a realm above the whirl of desire and the decay of time that this passage refers to.

- Given the descriptions of the wicked plotting against the just in chapters 3 and 5, there is also here perhaps a reference to Psalm 59, which is a prayer for deliverance from the traps of the wicked. See Ps. 59:9. That psalm compares the wicked to roaming wild dogs and asks God for deliverance from them in His fortress. The implication of the book is that that fortress on earth is Wisdom, and that the just will at the end of this earthly battle with the wicked be allowed into the final fortress against which there can be no more attacks.

3. Overall, the idea is that the just are in the hands of God and in peace, as chapter 3 says, but the unjust are mocked by God and live in a fake security.

D. Finally, this passage ends by describing the punishment of the wicked in seven images, probably to balance the seven rewards for the just, as described in chapter 3, verses 4 to 9.

1. In contrast to the just, whose hope is full of immortality, see chapter 3, verse 4, they will become dishonored corpses. Isaiah describes the forever burning corpses as an image of the end of the nations opposed to the true Israel. See Is. 66:24.

2. In contrast to the just, who will shine at the time of the visitation, see chapter 3, verse 7, the unjust will be, even among the dead, a mockery. One gets the impression that even the dead will mock the rich who thought of themselves as secure from the punishment of the unjust. See Ps. 49:15; Is. 14:9-11.

3. In contrast to the just, who will judge nations and rule over peoples, see chapter 3, verse 8, the wicked will be dashed speechless to the ground. There may be a reference to Heliodorus, the servant of King Seleucus, who tried to steal the treasury of the Temple, but was scourged by angels. See 2 Macc. 3:22-40. Or it could be a reference to Nebuchadnezzar, who was for a time deprived of reason as punishment for his pride. See Dan. 4:25-34.

4. In contrast to the just, whose justice has been made permanent like gold, see chapter 3, verse 6, the very foundations of the unjust will be shaken. Their image could be of internal earthquake in their souls that will destroy their self-image and self-confidence or of the very world around them shaken to its foundations. The majesty of God causes the very foundations of the earth to shake. See, e.g., Ex. 19:18; 2 Sam. 22:8; Ps. 18:8, 68:8; Is. 29:6. To the God-fearing, this awesome sign fills one with a sense of wonder at the power of God, but to the wicked, it is terrifying, for it destroys the worldly order upon which they thought they were relying. The New Testament picks up on this theme of the solidity of the just and the shaky foundations of the unjust in the image of the houses built on sand and rock, see Matt. 7:24-27, in the earthquake at Christ's death, which was the sign of the breaking of the power of death, see Matt. 27:51, and in earthquakes as a sign of judgment and the majesty of God, see Mark 13:8; Rev. 6:12, 8:5, 11:13, 19, 16:17-21.

5. In contrast to the just, who are the sacrificial firstfruits and most fit of humanity, see chapter 3, verse 6, acceptable as sacrifices to God, the unjust become like dry and barren fields. The image of the soul as being like dry and barren fields reflects the punishments promised to the enemies of Israel, who cut themselves off from the source of all true fruitfulness. See, e.g., Ps. 129:15; Is. 37:27. It is the water flowing from the new and everlasting Temple that makes all things truly fruitful. See Ez. 47. Jesus would take up this image in such parables as that of the sower and the vine and branches. See, e.g., Mark 4:1-20; John 15:1-6.

6. In contrast, to the just, who will understand the truth, see chapter 3, verse 9, the wicked will simply suffer anguish. For the just, leaving this world for another is merely leaving the image for the reality, for the true realm. See 2 Cor. 5:1-10. But for the unjust, there is great grieving both in losses on this earth and finally in death because they are leaving the only thing that they ever valued. Jesus picks up on this theme, telling the people to put their trust in true treasure, rather than transitory wealth. See Matt. 6:19-21.

7. And, unlike the just, who will abide with God, see chapter 3, verse 9, the unjust will simply be forgotten and have their sins as their companions. The idea is that one's own sins convict one and, if one chooses to have sin as a companion, God will respect that choice. As St. Paul points out, we choose our master, God or sin, and receive life or death as a reward. See, e.g., Rom. 6:15-23. Jesus says that, for those who claim Jesus as their Lord, but refuse to do His will, the response at the end of all things is, "Depart from me. I never knew you." Matt. 7:23.