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WISDOM

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ABBREVIATIONS

Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles

Amos—Amos

Bar—Baruch

1 Chr—1 Chronicles

2 Chr—2 Chronicles

Col—Colossians

1 Cor—1 Corinthians

2 Cor—2 Corinthians

Dan—Daniel

Deut—Deuteronomy

Ecl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes

Eph—Ephesians

Esth—Esther

Exod—Exodus

Ezek—Ezekiel

Ezra—Ezra

Gal—Galatians

Gen—Genesis

Hab—Habakkuk

Hag—Haggai

Heb—Hebrews

Hos—Hosea

Isa—Isaiah

Jas—James

Jdt—Judith

Jer—Jeremiah

Job—Job

Joel—Joel

John—John

1 John—1 John

2 John—2 John

3 John—3 John

Jonah—Jonah

Josh—Joshua

Jude—Jude

Judg—Judges

1 Kgs—1 Kings

2 Kgs—2 Kings

Lam—Lamentations

Lev—Leviticus

Luke—Luke

1 Macc—1 Maccabees

2 Macc—2 Maccabees

Mal—Malachi

Mark—Mark

Matt—Matthew

Mic—Micah

Nah—Nahum

Neh—Nehemiah

Num—Numbers

Obad—Obadiah

1 Pet—1 Peter

2 Pet—2 Peter

Phil—Philippians

Phlm—Philemon

Prov—Proverbs

Ps(s)—Psalms

Rev—Revelation

Rom—Romans

Ruth—Ruth

1 Sam—1 Samuel

2 Sam—2 Samuel

Sir—Sirach

Song—Song of Songs

1 Thess—1 Thessalonians

2 Thess—2 Thessalonians

1 Tim—1 Timothy

2 Tim—2 Timothy

Titus—Titus

Tob—Tobit

Wis—Wisdom

Zech—Zechariah

Zeph—Zephaniah

INTRODUCTION

Wisdom

Name, author, and audience

The book is known in the Septuagint (the early Greek version of the Old Testament) as *Wisdom of Solomon* and in the Latin tradition as *The Book of Wisdom*. Though neither Solomon (nor any individual for that matter) is ever named in the book, the author assumes the persona of the tenth-century Israelite king renowned for his wisdom. The book presupposes that its readers are familiar with the biblical portrait of Solomon, the wise king in 1 Kings 2–11, especially chapters 3; 5:9-14; 10:1-10. The author of another book categorized as wisdom literature, *Ecclesiastes* (fourth century B.C.), also assumes the persona of Solomon in *Ecclesiastes* 1–2 without naming him.

The author is not named, as in many biblical and apocryphal books. The practice enhances a book's authority by linking it to a tradition; the author's task is making that tradition relevant to a contemporary audience. Solomon represented the wisdom tradition. Though the author is unknown, a few biographical details can nonetheless be inferred from the book. The author is obviously a Jew with a fierce pride in Judaism, in God's call of the Jews, and in the relevance of the biblical story. The place of composition is generally assumed to be Alexandria, the Egyptian seaport on the Mediterranean Sea, on the Western Delta at the mouth of a branch of the Nile River, about 130 miles north of Cairo. The city, planned by Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.) and built a few years after his death, had a large Jewish community whose upper class would have nurtured and understood the complex ideas and language of the book. Though it seems that Jews of the time were not ordinarily admitted into the *gymnasium* to receive a Hellenistic education, the author must have been one of those allowed to study Greek literature, rhetoric, and philosophy. The author delights in virtuoso display, coining words, inventing arguments, and playing on biblical traditions. The author's project is similar to that of the prolific Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.–A.D. 50). Philo likewise stood within the Jewish tradition of biblical study, was familiar with pagan learning, and

interested in the spiritual dimension of individual life. Like Philo, the author of *Wisdom of Solomon* is confident in humans' capacity to know God and act virtuously, and confident too in the special vocation of Israel, whom God protects and endows with wisdom.

What audience does the author have in mind? Until recently, most scholars would have answered a Gentile audience, for they assumed that Judaism vigorously promoted itself in the Hellenistic world and that Jewish works written in Greek were part of that missionary effort. There are, to be sure, indications that many non-Jews found Judaism very attractive. Acts 13:16, for example, speaks of "those who fear God," "God-fearers" who were attracted to Judaism but stopped short of full conversion. And according to *Wisdom* 18:4, "the imperishable light of the law was to be given to the world." Recent scholarship, however, is divided on the issue, some feeling that the primary goal of Jewish literature written in Greek was to help Jews maintain and strengthen their identity and their faith in a pluralistic world, though they would not necessarily rule out apologetic and missionary goals as well.

It is likely that the primary audience envisioned by the book was Jewish, for only such an audience would have understood the esoteric commentary on the Bible and accepted the uncompromising monotheism and election of Israel as God's "son." The latter two teachings were contrary to the broad "philanthropic" outlook of educated pagans. Instruction of Jews was a necessity in the Hellenistic marketplace of ideas, for one could not assume young Jews would adopt the religion of their ancestors (see below). The biblical "base text" in *Wisdom of Solomon* is the wisdom books, especially the book of Proverbs. Like Ben Sira a century before within the Palestinian culture of Jerusalem, the author integrates those wisdom traditions with the historical books of the Bible, especially Exodus. The wisdom tradition, enriched with material from the historical books of the Bible, enabled both authors to deal with existential and national issues at one and the same time.

Date and place of composition

The book contains no specific historical references by which one can date it. The best evidence is literary; the affinities in phraseology and ideas with the writings of Philo of Alexandria suggest the authors were contemporaries in Alexandria (30 B.C.–A.D. 40). Specialized meanings of some words in *Wisdom of Solomon* match other writings of the period; tensions at the time between Jews and their urban neighbors would account for the book's concern with justice and its harsh criticism of Egyptian customs;

Wisdom of Solomon presupposes its readership is literate and thoroughly Hellenized, which would have been true of the large Jewish community at Alexandria. Alexandria was the capital of Egypt and a brilliant center of Hellenistic philosophy and art, which was symbolized by its famous museum and library. The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint) was, according to Jewish tradition, initiated by Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–246 B.C.) for the library. It is tempting to imagine that Wisdom of Solomon was written for such a vibrant community, where Jews would see the grandeur of their traditions depicted by an author skilled in Hellenistic rhetoric and philosophy as well as biblical lore.

Hellenistic Judaism

The Judaism reflected in Wisdom of Solomon is largely a product of Hellenistic culture rather than the Palestinian culture reflected in the Hebrew Bible. One should not, however, regard the two cultures as totally distinct, for each was multi-faceted and there was considerable overlap. “Hellenistic” is an adjective for Greek culture (“Hellenism”) in its interaction with the native cultures of the East, an interaction initiated by Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. The age was the first great marketplace of ideas in the East. The old cultures and societies of the ancient East, ruled by tradition and custom, were confronted by new ideas, customs, and people. Two areas are especially relevant to this introduction—religion and philosophy. Enthusiastic advocates of the new religions traveled about expounding their views and looking for followers. The religions and philosophies were regarded as ways of life as well as doctrines; they were intellectual-ethical systems.

Of the many emphases of Hellenistic religion, three are especially important for Wisdom of Solomon. The first was miracles. Performing miracles was the mark of a god, and lists called aretalogies were kept of a god’s miracles. The religions were also interested in immortality as a gift from god. Pre-Hellenistic Judaism did not use the concepts of immortality or eternal life to express the blessed future. Rather, it looked for divine restoration of the nation as a whole. But in the Hellenistic marketplace, a good religion had to promise immortality. Even in Egypt, where life after death had always been offered, it was now offered to more people than before. A third feature of Hellenistic religions was the claim of great antiquity. A religion had to be old to have credibility, for new ideas required validation by the tried and the true. Several ancient events were cited as standards of antiquity: the reign of Semiramis, the legendary founder of Assyria; the Trojan War, the oldest datable event in Greek history; and the Flood.

The above emphases appear in *Wisdom of Solomon*. *Wisdom* 11–19 portrays the central biblical event of the exodus as a series of miracles in which natural elements change their properties. Immortality is the dominant category of hope, which is a striking difference from earlier biblical books. As examples of antiquity, *Wisdom of Solomon* presents Adam as the first person guided by wisdom (10:1); among its heroes is Noah “when . . . the earth was flooded” (10:4-5). The author knows what attracts followers. What is most important, however, is that the author of *Wisdom* has entered the marketplace of ideas with the aim of persuading fellow Jews of the relevance of their Jewish faith.

Philosophical influences

Wisdom of Solomon engaged the same questions as the philosophies of the day, incorporating without apology whatever elements might make the biblical tradition more meaningful and credible to a Jewish audience. Ben Sira, the author of the book of *Sirach*, another piece of wisdom literature in the Old Testament, in an earlier century borrowed some concepts from Stoicism (e.g., *Sir* 41:14–42:8; 43:27; 36:1-4), but to a much lesser degree than this author. The principal Hellenistic philosophical movements were Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Skepticism. All were rooted in the great philosophical schools of the fourth century B.C., Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum. A widely-used division of the period shows that philosophy was conceived more broadly and integrally than in the modern West: logic (the study of reasoning and discourse), physics (the study of external nature), and ethics (the study of human nature and how life ought to be lived). All the schools agreed that philosophy was a serious affair and had the purpose of gaining life-enhancing wisdom.

Of these three schools, Stoicism was influential on *Wisdom of Solomon*. In physics, it was materialist, rejecting external entities such as Plato’s forms and Aristotle’s unmoved mover (God) as explanations of sensible reality and of motion. In ethics, it was strongly rationalist; happiness is attained by the right use of reason, and moral failures are failures in the functioning of reason. The most important philosophical influence on *Wisdom of Solomon*, however, was Middle Platonism (ca. 80 B.C.–A.D. 250), which is the scholarly designation of the Platonic tradition from the first century to the third century A.D. Shapers of the tradition included several Alexandrians—Philo and the church fathers Clement (ca. A.D. 150–215) and Origen (A.D. 185–254). Elements of Stoicism and Aristotelianism had by this time become part of the Platonic tradition. Middle Platonism became increasingly a metaphysical or theological system, characterized, among other things, by ideas as

thoughts in the mind of God, assimilation to God as an ideal of human life, and the hierarchy of being.

Aspects of Stoicism and Middle Platonism are found in popularized form in Wisdom of Solomon, especially in Wisdom 13–15. Examples of general Greek influence are the four virtues in Wisdom 8:7 (the Christian “cardinal” virtues), temperance, prudence, justice, and fortitude, and the viewing of fire, wind, stars, or water as animating forces in the world (13:2). Stoic influence is seen in the use of the concept of a world soul (7:24), materialist physics (8:1; 19:18), the proof from design (13:1), and the mode of argument called the *sorites* (chain argument) in 8:17-21. Borrowings from Middle Platonism include the pre-existence of souls (8:19), the sharp distinction between body and soul (8:20; 9:15), and the diminished reality of the material world compared to the spiritual world of heaven (9:15-16).

The author draws on one or another philosophical tenet without necessarily fully subscribing to the system of which they are a part. An example is the immortality of the soul (Wis 3:1-4), which in the book is a prelude to the establishment of the kingdom of God (see below).

The genre and the structure of the book

The genre of the book has been much debated. Indeed some scholars have even denied the book is a unity. In recent decades, a number of scholars have proposed that the book belongs to a type of literature mentioned in classical rhetorical treatises though no complete example has survived—the elaborate commendation of a way of life (which is sometimes called a proreptic). The author faced a situation unparalleled in Judaism—an educated community that required persuasion to *choose* afresh their ancestral traditions amid the clamor of competing and prestigious opportunities.

In recent decades, a consensus has formed about the broad structure of the book. The book has three parts: Part 1: 1:1–6:21, the depiction by means of typical figures and events of the authentic (though hidden) world and the justice that characterizes its governance; Part 2: 6:22–10:21, the gift of wisdom that enables one to understand this world and live happily in it; and Part 3: 11:1–19:22, the exodus as the great illustration of how the world operates. Ancient manuscripts were not provided with the visual guides of modern printed books. It was the responsibility of the author rather than copyists to indicate the structure. Authors used repetitions of key words to frame sections by using them at the beginning and end of a passage. This is called *inclusio*. The outline below, reflecting the consensus of biblical scholars, is a convenient guide to a complex and dense book. Some of the units below are marked by *inclusio* and the structure is chiasmic. In a chiasm

the elements are repeated in reverse, resulting in the pattern ABBA. It is common in ancient literature.

Part I (1:1–6:21) The Two Worlds

- A. Exhortation to pagan kings: Rule according to divine justice and seek wisdom! (1:1-11)
- B. A drama in which the true nature of the world is revealed (1:12–2:24)
 - C. Contrasting portraits: death of the just and impious (3–4)
- B'. Divine judgment against the wicked and for the righteous person (5:1-23)
- A'. Repetition of the exhortation to pagan kings: Rule according to divine justice and seek wisdom! (6:1-21).

Part 2 (6:22–10:21) Wisdom and the Way to It

Wisdom 6:22-25 introduces the themes. Wisdom 6:22–8:21 is composed of seven passages.

- A. The origin of the wise king is like any other human (7:1-6)
 - B. I, Solomon, prayed for wisdom (7:7-12)
 - C. Giving of wisdom of God to Solomon (7:13-22a; vv. 13b and 21a have an *inclusio* around “hide” and “hidden”)
 - D. Praise of wisdom—its nature, origin, and attributes (7:22b–8:1)
 - C'. Solomon will marry wisdom who lives with God (8:2-9)
- B'. Thoughts of the young king (8:10-16)
- A'. Young Solomon will ask for wisdom (8:17-21; vv. 17b and 21d, *inclusio*: “heart”)

Chapters 7 and 8 prepare for the prayer at their beginning (7:7) and end (8:21). The Prayer of Solomon in chapter 9 has three parts: vv. 1-6 about human beings, vv. 7-12 about Solomon, and vv. 13-18 about human beings. The prayer is the center of book because the beginning of the prayer is concerned with creation (theme of Part I) and the end is concerned with salvation (theme of Part II).

Chapter 10 presents the eight “wisdom heroes” of Genesis, each of whom is involved in a contrast. Abel is opposed to his brother Cain. All except Cain were helped by wisdom who came to their rescue. The reference to prayer in 10:20 is an *inclusio* of 19:9, the final verse of the book.

Part 3 (11:1–19:22) The Exodus: God Provides for His Child Israel

The exodus is viewed as seven “comparisons” (Greek: *synkrisis*, 11:1-14 and 16:1–19:22). The plagues against the Egyptians (given in italics below) are contrasted with the blessings given to the Israelites during the exodus (given in roman type below). The comparisons are interrupted by two digressions in verses 11:15–15:19.

Comparison 1. 11:6-14 *flowing water*—water from the rock

Digression 1: the moderation of God in punishing the wicked, Egypt, and Canaan (11:15–12:27)

Digression 2: a critique of idol worshipers (13:1–15:19)

Comparison 2. 16:1-4 *frogs*—quails

Comparison 3. 16:5-14 *flies and locusts*—bronze serpent

Comparison 4. 16:15-29 *storm and hail*—manna

Comparison 5. 17:1–18:4 *darkness*—light

Comparison 6. 18:5-25 *death of first-born*—Israel spared

Comparison 7. 19:1-9 *drowning in the Red Sea*—passage through the Red Sea

Final statement and broadening of the perspective (19:10-22).

The meaning of the book of Wisdom

By making Solomon the speaker and by building on the wisdom tradition, the author is employing the most universal and least nationalist part of the Bible. The appeal is to the nations (in the person of their kings), especially in 1:1-15 and 6:1-21. Though the envisioned audience is primarily Jewish, the book addresses Gentile rulers in these passages; the same dynamic is found in Psalm 2 and Isaiah 40–55. They are called to recognize the just God’s governance of the world and the coming judgment that was part of that governance. In part 2 (6:22–10:21) Solomon appears as the model king and seeker after wisdom. Thereafter Israel is the protected and wise “son/child” of God (part 3, 10:22–19:22). The universalist outreach of the wisdom literature has been enriched and qualified by the special role of Israel. Israel is a witness to the world of God’s justice and protection.

Wisdom of Solomon seeks to demonstrate the reality of the “kingdom of God,” or, in other terms, the sovereignty of Israel’s Lord. To many Jews, that sovereignty was hidden in the sense that it was not yet fully realized and visible. Non-Jews denied the rule of Israel’s God, like the gang in Wisdom 2 who say “ by mere chance were we born” (2:2). They kill the righteous person, God’s child (2:20); only at the judgment do they see the resurrection of the child and the reality of the “kingdom” or sovereignty

of God (Wis 5). In Wisdom of Solomon, knowledge of “the kingdom” does not consist merely in an intellectual appreciation of the Lord’s universal dominion. Rather, the book expresses the concrete hopes of Jews in the period at the turn of the era. Like many in Judaism, the author seems to regard Israel to be still in exile, awaiting the fullness of redemption. Jewish literature both in the Diaspora and Palestine attests to the deep and widespread conviction that the national story has not yet come to its proper conclusion. Psalm 106:47 expresses a widespread feeling: “Save us, LORD, our God; / gather us from among the nations.” Another biblical book awaiting the restoration of Israel is Daniel, written during the Maccabean crisis in the mid-second century B.C. Daniel 12:2-3 also viewed restoration as resurrection: “Many of those who sleep / in the dust of the earth shall awake; / Some to everlasting life, / others to reproach and everlasting disgrace. / But those with insight shall shine brightly / like the splendor of the firmament, / and those who lead the many to justice / shall be like the stars forever.” Wisdom of Solomon has the same spirit (e.g., Wis 3:6-8; 4:16–5:2). Wisdom 3:7-8 seems to allude to the Daniel text and says of the just who have been slain that “they shall judge nations and rule over peoples, / and the LORD shall be their king forever.” The resurrection of the dead in Wisdom 5 seems to refer to the same intermediate state as Daniel, where the righteous who have died await the restoration of Israel and the full realization of the reign of God.

The teaching on immortality (Greek: *athanasia*, 3:4; 4:1; 8:13, 17; 15:3) and incorruptibility (6:18, 19) must be understood in the same context of the judgment preceding restoration. Though the book borrows the Platonic language of the immortality of the soul, the context is completely different. For one thing, the author is primarily concerned with the Lord’s governing rather than with an individual soul’s reward. For another, the governing has a historical context—the restoration of Israel who, the author believes, is still in exile.

Three affirmations of the book have a special resonance for modern Christians. The first is its distinctive understanding of the kingdom (sovereignty) of God, which is perhaps the most persistent theme of the Bible. God’s justice actually rules the world even though human kings are under the impression they have the final say. Divine wisdom is required to see divine justice at work. Such wisdom is (paradoxically) granted only to those who earnestly seek it. Though operative now, divine justice is not yet visible to the world. It becomes visible when God’s “son” (2:18; 12:21; 16:10, 26; 18:4; also rendered “child” in 2:13; 16:21; 19:6 and “servant” in 12:7) is faithful to his “father” (2:16; 11:10). Fidelity means allowing the justice of God

to work. Israel is God's child and thus witnesses to the true King of the universe. From its very founding in the exodus, Israel was protected, its enemies punished, and God was revealed as Lord of the universe.

God's lordship is not timeless, however. Israel does not live outside of history. For the author, the Lord had not finished regathering Israel from its exile. The critical time of refounding the community is approaching. Divine rule has been hidden in that it has not yet appeared in its fullness. There are now, therefore, "two worlds," corresponding in a sense to the two ways in ancient wisdom literature. One world is all too familiar, for its law is that might makes right and that those faithful to God are at risk from violent and selfish people. It is ruled over by the kings of this world. Though the other world has not appeared fully, it is destined to last; it is eternal, for it is ruled by God. Each world has its adherents, its citizens. The citizens of this world are doomed, however, as their world is passing away. The citizens of the true world already possess eternal life, for their world will endure.

The real world is marked by life and the other is marked by death. Paradoxically, it is when the righteous are faithful and rescued that the real world appears. In part 1, the death of the (typical) righteous person who trusts in God shows forth the true world when God raises up that person in the sight of those who killed him. In part 3, the justice of God is shown forth in the rescue of the "child" of God, Israel. As they are rescued in the sight of the Egyptians, the latter come to acknowledge the true God. The true world is revealed in the trusting and obedient conduct of the chosen ones.

A second contemporary issue is that God is Lord of the universe, which consists of nature and history. Many believers instinctively make God the Lord of heaven but retreat from affirming the lordship of earth, nature, and history. They have difficulty seeing God at work in the world, in human history, and are disposed to think separately of God acting in history and in nature. Wisdom of Solomon affirms the central reality of God the creator and of God's choice of Israel. God acts in history (in the book's perspective) primarily by dealing with Israel, reshaping at will human activity and natural elements. "For the elements, in ever-changing harmony, / like strings of the harp, produce new melody, / while the flow of music steadily persists" (19:18). To recognize this rule takes divine wisdom. It must be sought earnestly in prayer, preferred to all else, and yet, paradoxically, is conferred as a gift. Its possession enables one to see the true nature of reality and to remain faithful to it.

A third point relevant to Christian readers is the outreach of God that is called wisdom. Despite the author's learning in Greek philosophy, God

Introduction to Wisdom

is not portrayed as “the prime mover” or transcendent ideal. God is engaged in human history and dwells with the human race. At times, divine wisdom is the energy that runs through the universe; at other times, it is the inspiration that enters into human beings, directing them to act justly and trust in God’s fatherly protection. Christian readers will see in this wisdom aspects of their triune God, which will be made more explicit in the pages of the New Testament and in subsequent Christian reflection.

Wisdom

THE TWO WORLDS

1:1–6:21

Part 1 of the book of Wisdom develops and combines two biblical traditions. The first is the view of world history found, among other places, in Psalms 2, 48, 89, 96; Isaiah 10:5-19; 44:24–45:7; 55; and Jeremiah 27, 29: the Lord, Most High over heavenly beings and earthly kings, directs the course of history, and the Lord's servant Israel is, in principle at least, similarly "most high" over the nations. Rulers of the earth are thus agents of the Lord and will be judged according to whether they ruled justly and wisely (Wis 1:1-15 and 6:1-21). Israel is privileged and protected, though explicitly identified as "your [the LORD's] children" only in part 3 (19:6). In part 1, the "child of the LORD" (2:13) is left unspecified. The second biblical tradition used in part 1 is the doctrine of "the two ways" (found especially in Proverbs and Psalms), which portrays the moral life in dramatic terms as walking on either of two opposed paths—the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked, each path having its proper destiny. Wisdom 1–6 shows the wicked (usually referring to a group) plotting against the righteous individual (Wis 2) and the respective destinies of each way (Wis 5). One of the "Two Worlds" in part 1 is the world of everyday experience. Ruled over by earthly kings, it is characterized by rampant wickedness and is short-lived. The other "world" is not always visible. Ruled over by the Lord, it is inhabited by the righteous who trust in God their Father (2:16). The true world becomes visible when the righteous act faithfully in the face of opposition, for God intervenes to rescue them. Divine intervention functions as a judgment that the righteous will live forever and the wicked will perish (Wis 5).

Part 1 is framed by exhortations to the rulers of the world in Wisdom 1:1-15 and 6:1-21. Couched in the language of personal relationship, the first exhortation warns the rulers (and their subjects) against inviting death through wickedness; the second exhortation urges them to court wisdom.



I. The Reward of Righteousness

Exhortation to Righteousness, the Key to Life

1¹ Love righteousness, you who judge the earth;
think of the LORD in goodness,
and seek him in integrity of heart;
2² Because he is found by those who do not test him,
and manifests himself to those who do not disbelieve him.
3³ For perverse counsels separate people from God,
and his power, put to the proof,
rebukes the foolhardy;

4⁴ Because into a soul that plots evil wisdom does not enter,
nor does she dwell in a body under debt of sin.
5⁵ For the holy spirit of discipline flees deceit
and withdraws from senseless counsels
and is rebuked when unrighteousness occurs.
6⁶ For wisdom is a kindly spirit,
yet she does not acquit blasphemous lips;
Because God is the witness of the inmost self
and the sure observer of the heart
and the listener to the tongue.

At chapter 6, the second exhortation is used to close this section and transition to the next.

I:1-15 Seek righteousness and wisdom to avoid death!

The instructions of Proverbs 1–9 urge the son or disciple to seek wisdom above all. Though wisdom must be earnestly sought, it is ultimately a pure gift of God. Wisdom brings life, which is defined as health, reputation, wealth, a suitable spouse, and children. Its opposite, death arrives prematurely as punishment. Wisdom 1 develops these ideas from wisdom literature, especially Proverbs 8:15, “By me kings reign,” and Proverbs 8:35-36, “[Whoever] finds me finds life / . . . all who hate me love death.” Wisdom retains Proverbs’ language of love and courtship as a metaphor of the search for wisdom (see Wis 1:1, 12, 16).

The warning to “you who judge the earth” (Wis 1:1), as in Pss 2:10 and 96:9-10, presumes all kings are under the dominion of the Lord; rulers represent all lands and peoples, for wisdom’s invitation is universal. The language of affection is used of the quest for wisdom in Wisdom of Solomon, to love, to seek (v. 1), to find (v. 2), to dwell (v. 4), to court (v. 12). Just as the son or disciple in Proverbs must submit to discipline (*paideia*), so also must kings/peoples of the earth in Wisdom 1:5, where *paideia* is translated “discipline.” To oppose the process of discipline is to “test [God]” (1:2), which is the attitude of the wicked in 2:19. Wisdom literature usually gives

⁷For the spirit of the LORD fills the world,
is all-embracing, and knows
whatever is said.

⁸Therefore those who utter wicked things will not go unnoticed,
nor will chastising condemnation pass them by.

⁹For the devices of the wicked shall be scrutinized,
and the sound of their words shall reach the LORD,
for the chastisement of their transgressions;

¹⁰Because a jealous ear hearkens to everything,
and discordant grumbings are not secret.

¹¹Therefore guard against profitless grumbling,
and from calumny withhold your tongues;

For a stealthy utterance will not go unpunished,
and a lying mouth destroys the soul.

¹²Do not court death by your erring way of life,
nor draw to yourselves destruction by the works of your hands.

¹³Because God did not make death, ►
nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living.

reasons for the conduct it teaches; one finds “because” and “for” throughout the book (e.g., seven occurrences in 1:1-15 alone). The terms “justice,” “goodness,” “wisdom,” “spirit of the LORD,” “holy spirit,” and “power,” are chosen for their cumulative effect and in vv. 1-15 are virtually synonymous. Seeking wisdom is not a matter of the mind alone; one must be open to discipline, must act justly, and revere God. The spirit as “all-embracing” (1:7, literally: “holding all things together”) was a Stoic expression for fiery air that was thought to hold each thing together. The book applies that function to God’s spirit in 8:1.

Older wisdom literature promised that those earnestly seeking wisdom would gain life, which was understood in this-world terms as health, longevity, children, a suitable spouse, wealth, and reputation. Premature death was the lot of the wicked; it symbolized failure to gain blessings. Wisdom 1:13-15 asserts something new: God did not make death the final dissolution of human beings, for the universe has a positive goal. The overarching principle is stated in verse 14, “the creatures of the world are wholesome,” i.e., all that is created preserves its being. The same verse conceives of “the nether world” as a place of lethal power; that power does not extend to

► This symbol indicates a cross reference number in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. See page 88 for number citations.

¹⁴For he fashioned all things that
they might have being,
and the creatures of the world
are wholesome;
There is not a destructive drug among
them
nor any domain of Hades on
earth,
¹⁵For righteousness is undying.

**The Wicked Reject Immortality
and Righteousness Alike**

¹⁶It was the wicked who with hands
and words invited death,
considered it a friend, and pined
for it,
and made a covenant with it,
Because they deserve to be allied
with it.

2 ¹For, not thinking rightly, they said
among themselves:
“Brief and troubled is our lifetime;
there is no remedy for our dying,
nor is anyone known to have come
back from Hades.

²For by mere chance were we born,
and hereafter we shall be as though
we had not been;
Because the breath in our nostrils is
smoke,
and reason a spark from the beat-
ing of our hearts,
³And when this is quenched, our
body will be ashes
and our spirit will be poured
abroad like empty air.
⁴Even our name will be forgotten in
time,
and no one will recall our deeds.
So our life will pass away like the
traces of a cloud,
and will be dispersed like a mist
Pursued by the sun’s rays
and overpowered by its heat.
⁵For our lifetime is the passing of a
shadow;
and our dying cannot be deferred
because it is fixed with a seal; and
no one returns.
⁶Come, therefore, let us enjoy the
good things that are here,

earth. Human beings die because of their mortality, but the power of death to end life permanently is ended.

1:16–2:24 The wicked and their plans

The righteous-wicked contrast (the “two worlds”) is dramatized as an encounter between two groups about their beliefs and plans (2:1-9). How will the gang deal with a righteous individual who believes in the very things they reject (1:10-16)? They decide to test which way of life is valid, theirs or that of the righteous individual who boasts God is his father who will deliver his “son” from foes (1:17-18). They decide to kill him to see if God will do anything (v. 20). The answer will come in Wisdom 5. Wisdom 2 is framed by two verses (1:16 and 2:24) that highlight the words “death” and “possession” (Greek *meris*).

- and make use of creation with
youthful zest.
- ⁷Let us have our fill of costly wine
and perfumes,
and let no springtime blossom
pass us by;
- ⁸let us crown ourselves with rose-
buds before they wither.
- ⁹Let no meadow be free from our
wantonness;
everywhere let us leave tokens
of our merriment,
for this is our portion, and this
our lot.
- ¹⁰Let us oppress the righteous poor;
let us neither spare the widow
nor revere the aged for hair grown
white with time.
- ¹¹But let our strength be our norm of
righteousness;
for weakness proves itself useless.
- ¹²Let us lie in wait for the righteous
one, because he is annoying
to us;
he opposes our actions,
Reproaches us for transgressions of
the law
and charges us with violations of
our training.
- ¹³He professes to have knowledge
of God
and styles himself a child of the
LORD.
- ¹⁴To us he is the censure of our
thoughts;
-

Each of the two ways has its adherents (i.e., those “in possession of” it). The wicked reveal their beliefs and behavior as well as those of the righteous individual (2:12-20). Their irreverence, pleasure seeking, and violence are an allusion to the opening scene in Proverbs 1:8-19. The wicked are said to consider death a friend and to make a covenant with it (Wis 1:16). “Covenant with death” borrows from Isaiah 28:15, where “death” is a metaphor for Egypt with whom some in Israel allied themselves instead of trusting in the Lord.

The father-son language in Wisdom 2 is borrowed from wisdom literature, in particular from Proverbs. Proverbs 3:12 teaches that, “whom the LORD loves he reproves, and he chastises the son he favors.” Wisdom of Solomon regards the sufferings of the just “child of God” as divine reproof through which the son learns about divine governance. From Proverbs the author borrows the concept of “discipline” (Hebrew *mûsâr*, Greek *paideia*) by which the teacher helps the disciple to become wise and mature; it can involve suffering. Also from Proverbs is the idea that the conduct of children honors or dishonors their parents (see Prov 10:1; 15:20; 17:21, 25; 19:13, 26; 23:22-26). Such is the sense of the accusation that the wicked have sinned against their “training” (*paideia*, 2:12). It is also possible, as some scholars have suggested, that the example of the loyal servant who is humiliated

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>merely to see him is a hardship
for us,
¹⁵Because his life is not like that of
others,
and different are his ways.
¹⁶He judges us debased;
he holds aloof from our paths as
from things impure.
He calls blest the destiny of the
righteous
and boasts that God is his Father.
¹⁷Let us see whether his words be
true;
let us find out what will happen
to him in the end.
¹⁸For if the righteous one is the son
of God, God will help him</p> | <p>and deliver him from the hand of
his foes.
¹⁹With violence and torture let us put
him to the test
that we may have proof of his
gentleness
and try his patience.
²⁰Let us condemn him to a shameful
death;
for according to his own words,
God will take care of him."
²¹These were their thoughts, but they
erred;
for their wickedness blinded
them,
²²And they did not know the hidden
counsels of God;</p> |
|---|---|

and then rescued by God (e.g., Joseph in Genesis 37–50 and the servant in Isaiah 53) has influenced Wisdom 2 and 5.

If “the devil” is indeed a reference to the devil, as most scholars hold, blaming the devil for death here is a striking innovation of the book. “Devil,” however, is most probably not a good translation of Greek *diabolos*, which reflects Hebrew *satan*. “The satan” (with the article) referring to a particular figure occurs in two post-exilic texts (Job 1–2 and Zech 3:1–2) with a different meaning: “the satan” is an official of the heavenly court who scrutinizes human conduct and accuses them before God. In these passages, the Hebrew term *hassatan* means literally “the Adversary” or “Accuser.” *Satan* (without the article) in 1 Chronicles 21:1 is disputed, but can mean “adversary” according to recent commentators. Such uncertainty makes attractive the view of St. Clement (*Epistle to the Corinthians* 3–4, A.D. 96), followed by some modern scholars, that Greek *diabolos* simply means “adversary” in Wisdom 2:24 and refers not to the snake who tempted the man and the woman in Genesis 3, but to Cain who murdered his brother Abel out of jealousy. In Wisdom 10:1–2, the author does not consider the sin of Adam as particularly grievous, but in 10:3–4 blames Cain for three instances of death: the death of Abel, Cain’s own spiritual death of exile, and the death of almost the entire human race by flood. It is likely therefore that death entered the world through Cain’s murder of Abel.

neither did they count on a recompense for holiness nor discern the innocent souls' reward.

- ◀ ²³For God formed us to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made us.
- ◀ ²⁴But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who are allied with him experience it.

The Hidden Counsels of God

A. On Suffering

- 3** ¹The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them.
- ²They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead; and their passing away was thought an affliction
- ³and their going forth from us, utter destruction.

3:1–4:20 The hidden meaning of the suffering of the just, the barrenness of the virtuous woman, and premature death

Instead of the proper conclusion to the story of the wicked versus the righteous individual begun in Wisdom 2, the author treats three classical problems of divine justice: the just who suffer (3:1-12), the virtuous woman who cannot bear children (3:13–4:6), and the premature death of a righteous person (4:7-20). The proper conclusion to the story will be told in Wisdom 5, deferring it until it then heightens interest in the problem of justice. Wisdom 3–4 can be considered an excursus, like those on the moderation of God toward sinners (11:15–12:27) and false worship (13:1–15:19).

3:1-12 The meaning of the suffering of the just

The torment of the just person depicted in Wisdom 2 raised the perennial question, why should “a child of the LORD” (2:13), a just person, suffer? This is the question of Job, and it is an abiding dilemma in biblical religion. This question is answered in the very first verse (3:1), they are in the hand of God, not in the “hand of [their] foes” (2:18). The following verses give supporting arguments: the righteous only *seemed* to be punished, but they are at peace (3:2-4); they were being tested (3:5-6; see Prov 3:11-12). Found worthy, they shall shine like the stars and rule like the angels with God (3:7-9; see Dan 12:1-3). That the righteous will rule Israel after their death is a corollary of their being with the angels in heaven, who were seen as servants of God. In contrast, the wicked are truly punished, have no hope, and their wives and children are accursed (3:10-12).

But they are in peace.

⁴For if to others, indeed, they seem punished,
yet is their hope full of immortality;

⁵Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed,
because God tried them
and found them worthy of himself.

⁶As gold in the furnace, he proved them,
and as sacrificial offerings he took them to himself.

⁷In the time of their judgment they shall shine
and dart about as sparks through stubble;

⁸They shall judge nations and rule over peoples,
and the LORD shall be their King forever.

⁹Those who trust in him shall understand truth,
and the faithful shall abide with him in love:

Because grace and mercy are with his holy ones,
and his care is with the elect.

¹⁰But the wicked shall receive a punishment to match their thoughts,
since they neglected righteousness and forsook the LORD.

¹¹For those who despise wisdom and instruction are doomed.
Vain is their hope, fruitless their labors,
and worthless their works.

¹²Their wives are foolish and their children wicked,
accursed their brood.

B. On Childlessness

¹³Yes, blessed is she who, childless and undefiled,
never knew transgression of the marriage bed;
for she shall bear fruit at the judgment of souls.

¹⁴So also the eunuch whose hand wrought no misdeed,
who held no wicked thoughts against the LORD—
For he shall be given fidelity's choice reward

3:13–4:6 The virtuous woman who cannot bear children

As in the preceding section, this opens with a portrait of a type of person generally considered to be an argument *against* divine justice, a virtuous woman who was childless. Children were the means of living beyond death; the barren wives of Genesis (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel) experienced a kind of resurrection when they had children. Not only such women, but virtuous eunuchs will also have their reward (3:14). The children of adulterers, on the other hand, will have no issue or die prematurely or in dishonor (3:16-19). They are a tree with shallow roots, vulnerable to strong winds, leaving behind no lasting fruit (4:3-6; see Psalm 1). The virtuous barren woman and eunuch, on the other hand, leave behind an immortal memory (4:1-2).

and a more gratifying heritage in
the LORD's temple.

¹⁵For the fruit of noble struggles is a
glorious one;
and unfailing is the root of under-
standing.

¹⁶But the children of adulterers will
remain without issue,
and the progeny of an unlawful
bed will disappear.

¹⁷For should they attain long life, they
will be held in no esteem,
and dishonored will their old age
be in the end;

¹⁸Should they die abruptly, they will
have no hope
nor comfort in the day of scrutiny;

¹⁹for dire is the end of the wicked
generation.

4 ¹Better is childlessness with virtue;
for immortal is the memory of
virtue,
acknowledged both by God and
human beings.

²When it is present people imitate it,
and they long for it when it is
gone;

Forever it marches crowned in
triumph,

victorious in unsullied deeds of
valor.

³But the numerous progeny of the
wicked shall be of no avail;
their spurious offshoots shall not
strike deep root
nor take firm hold.

⁴For even though their branches
flourish for a time,
they are unsteady and shall be
rocked by the wind
and, by the violence of the winds,
uprooted;

⁵Their twigs shall be broken off
untimely,
their fruit useless, unripe for
eating,
fit for nothing.

⁶For children born of lawless unions
give evidence of the wickedness
of their parents, when they
are examined.

C. On Early Death

⁷But the righteous one, though he die
early, shall be at rest.

⁸For the age that is honorable comes ►
not with the passing of time,
nor can it be measured in terms
of years.

4:7-20 The premature death of a righteous person

A third obstacle to believing in a just God is the death of a "son" of this God at a young age. If the fruit of righteousness is long life, how is God just in this case? The author reinterprets old age as mature ripeness rather than longevity as such (4:7-9) in view of immortality.

The example of Enoch (4:10-14) illustrates the teaching, though he is not named, following the convention of wisdom literature. Enoch was the seventh of the ten pre-Flood heroes in Genesis 5. Instead of dying, literally, "[he] walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three

⁹Rather, understanding passes for
gray hair,
and an unsullied life is the
attainment of old age.
¹⁰The one who pleased God was
loved,
living among sinners, was trans-
ported—
¹¹Snatched away, lest wickedness
pervert his mind
or deceit beguile his soul;
¹²For the witchery of paltry things
obscures what is right
and the whirl of desire transforms
the innocent mind.
¹³Having become perfect in a short
while,
he reached the fullness of a long
career;
¹⁴for his soul was pleasing to the
LORD,
therefore he sped him out of the
midst of wickedness.
But the people saw and did not
understand,
nor did they take that consider-
ation into account.
¹⁶Yes, the righteous one who has died
will condemn
the sinful who live;

And youth, swiftly completed, will
condemn
the many years of the unrighteous
who have grown old.
¹⁷For they will see the death of the
wise one
and will not understand what
the LORD intended,
or why he kept him safe.
¹⁸They will see, and hold him in
contempt;
but the LORD will laugh them to
scorn.
¹⁹And they shall afterward become
dishonored corpses
and an unceasing mockery among
the dead.
For he shall strike them down
speechless and prostrate
and rock them to their founda-
tions;
They shall be utterly laid waste
and shall be in grief
and their memory shall perish.

The Judgment of the Wicked

²⁰Fearful shall they come, at the
counting up of their sins,
and their lawless deeds shall
convict them to their face.

hundred sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him" (Gen 5:22, 24, literal translation). He lived far fewer years than the other pre-Flood heroes, and the text does not explicitly say he died. Rather, he was "transported" (4:10), "snatched away" (4:11), because "he became perfect in a short while" (4:13); the latter phrase is an interpretation of Genesis 5:24, "Enoch walked with God."

The meaning of the death of the just person, however, is lost on the wicked (4:14c-19). Only at the final judgment will they understand. The nature of the judgment will be described in the next section.

5¹Then shall the righteous one with
great assurance confront
his oppressors who set at nought
his labors.

²Seeing this, the wicked shall be
shaken with dreadful fear,
and be amazed at the unexpected
salvation.

³They shall say among themselves,
rueful
and groaning through anguish
of spirit:

“This is the one whom once we held
as a laughingstock
and as a type for mockery,
⁴fools that we were!

His life we accounted madness,
and death dishonored.

⁵See how he is accounted among
the heavenly beings;
how his lot is with the holy
ones!

⁶We, then, have strayed from the way
of truth,
and the light of righteousness did
not shine for us,
and the sun did not rise for us.

⁷We were entangled in the thorns of
mischief and of ruin;
we journeyed through trackless
deserts,
but the way of the LORD we never
knew.

⁸What did our pride avail us?
What have wealth and its boast-
fulness afforded us?

⁹All of them passed like a shadow
and like a fleeting rumor;

¹⁰Like a ship traversing the heaving
water:
when it has passed, no trace can
be found,
no path of its keel in the waves.

¹¹Or like a bird flying through the
air;

5:1-23 The last judgment, confession of the wicked, and arming of the cosmos

The narrative of the gang’s attack on the righteous individual, begun in Wisdom 2, is brought to its conclusion in Wisdom 5. The wicked presented their philosophy of life in their first speech (2:1-20) and retract it in their second speech (5:3-13). Both speeches are provoked by the righteous person, whom the wicked have failed to understand.

What is the scene? No details are given except that the wicked see the righteous person raised up from the dead. As noted in the Introduction, it is best interpreted as the judgment that precedes the new age when the righteous become rulers. Such judgment scenes are attested in classical biblical literature (e.g., Ps 82; Isa 41; 45:20-21; etc.). The scene that most closely resembles this one is Daniel 12:1-3; it too has those who have been killed in God’s cause raised up, whereas their enemies are “in everlasting horror and disgrace.” The view taken here is that this judgment precedes the final restoration; it is left vague because the author did not know the timetable, but only that those loyal to the Lord would rule in the new age.