

THE BOOK OF WISDOM

Introduction. The Book of Wisdom is sometimes called the *Wisdom of Solomon* to connect it with the great Wisdom figure of Israel. It was common in the ancient times for writers to credit their writings to well-known and well-respected figures from the past. But in actuality, this book of the Bible was written by an anonymous Greek-speaking person living in Alexandria, Egypt, about 100BC. It was the last book of the Old Testament to be written.

Living in a cosmopolitan city like Alexandria, Jews were confronted with all kinds of pagan beliefs and would have been tempted to abandon the faith of their ancestors for “modern ideas” flowing from Greek culture that seemed to be taking over the world, even their beloved Jerusalem.

It was within this milieu that an anonymous Jew was inspired by God to write this book. He wanted to show the Jewish people that true Wisdom was found in God’s revelation and not in pagan philosophies and religions. The main interest of the author was to reassure the Jewish community in Egypt that it was worthwhile to live in a pagan land despite its hardships. Since this Greek written book is not found in the Hebrew Canon of the Bible, it is one of the seven books of the Old Testament not contained in the Protestant Canon of Scripture.

Division of Chapters

Most scholars subdivide this book into three parts:

Part 1 (Chapters 1 to 6:21): Teaches about the justice and immortality that would come to those who remained faithful to God. By the time this book was written, Israel believed in an afterlife.

Part 2 (Chapters 6:22 to 11:1): Places Solomon in the pulpit who praised Wisdom for its unmatched value.

Part 3 (Chapters 11:2 to 19:22): A long review of Israel’s history up until the time of the Exodus. It focuses on God’s providential care for the Jews during the Exodus and his punishment of the Egyptians. It was an exhortation to the Jews living in Alexandria that they should not abandon the faith of their ancestors for new fashionable ideas.

COMMENTARY

PART 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF WISDOM IN DETERMINING THE DESTINY OF PEOPLE

In his book, *The Men and Message of the Old Testament*, Peter Ellis, C.S.S.R., summarizes the message of the first five chapters in this way:

The author contrasts the philosophy of life (2:1-20) and errors of the wicked (2:21-24). With the happy lot of the just, who are rewarded by God with eternal life (3:1-9; 5:3-5; 5:15-16), while the wicked are punished by God during their earthly life by dishonor and ill-fame (3:10-4:19) and by separation from God in the next life (4:20-5:23). (p.559)

CHAPTER 1:1-15: Love Justice

“Love justice, you who rule the earth....” (v.1)

“Wisdom is a kindly spirit, yet she acquits not the blasphemer of his guilty lips....” (v.6)

“No one who utters evil things shall go unnoticed....” (v.8)

“God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living.” (v.13)

The faithful is exhorted to love justice as a key aspect of authentic Wisdom. Conversely, the vice of injustice is characterized by deceit and unwise counsel. The justice spoken of here is relational and demands a proper relationship with God, expressed in word and deed. *Integrity* is another word for justice. The person of integrity is one who adheres to given values even in the face of opposition.

Justice is associated with Wisdom. Wisdom recognizes what is evil and refuses to enact injustice. The wise act justly because they know God sees into the human heart and rewards the righteous (v.6), which is how Solomon is characterized in 1Kgs 3:6-14.

Verse 13. God reminds us that he is a God of life: *“He did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living.”*

Pause: What does the term justice mean to you? What are some grave violations of justice in our nation today?

CHAPTER 1:16 to 2:24: The wicked speak

“...Brief and sorrowful is our life; neither is there any remedy for man’s dying, nor is anyone known to have come back from the nether world.” (2:1)

“Come then let us enjoy the good things that are real.... Let us have our fill of costly wine and perfumes....” (2:6-7)

“Let us oppress the needy just man; let us neither spare the widow nor revere the old man....” (2:10)

“Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us; he sets himself against our doings....” (2:12)

“God formed man to be imperishable....” (2:23)

In 2:1-20, the author gives the pulpit the unbeliever who reminds us of Ecclesiastes who could not see any real purpose in life because of the reality of eternal extinction in death. *“Brief and sorrowful is life”*— there is no escape from death. Because life is short and will end in death, the only thing to do is to enjoy the good things life offers here on earth such as good wines and perfumes (vv 6-7).

2:10-11. There is a sudden and evil turn in the unjust person’s thinking, an exhortation to oppress the poor, the widows and the elderly. The wicked justify their behavior with a double-sided principle: power makes right; weakness is useless (v.11).

2:12-20—An exhortation to oppose the righteous one. In church, we listen to these verses on the Friday before Good Friday. The reasoning of the unjust or wicked takes on a very negative twist in this section. If might is right and what is weak is useless, then whoever opposes the wicked will be subject to the weapons of their wrath. What had begun as an exhortation to just enjoy life (vv 6-9) ends in calling for a grave act of injustice, the brutal just death of the just (vv 17-20). The wicked despise the just one because he opposes their wicked ways. Also, he calls God his father and claims to be his son and the just believe that his end will be happy. It is easy how the early Christians saw the figure of the persecuted Christ in these verses.

2: 21-24. After the wicked one leaves the pulpit, the author comments on how wrong they are in their thinking. Their wickedness blinds them to the ways of God. They do not know that God made man to be imperishable. It was only through the envy of the

devil that death entered the world. Verses 23-24 are significant because this is the first time in the Old Testament that the serpent mentioned in Genesis 3 is equated with the devil, and also the first time the hope of human immortality is expressly mentioned. Human beings are not created immortal. Rather, they are created *for* immortality.

Pause: What causes some people to treat others in very ugly ways?

CHAPTERS 3:1 to 4:19: The reward of just living

“The souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torrent shall touch them.” (3:1)

“Blessed is she, who childless and undefiled, knew not transgression of the marriage bed; she shall bear fruit at the visitation of souls.” (3:13)

“But the just man though he dies early shall be at rest.” (4:7)

This section has three parts: reward for the just (3:1-12), childlessness (3:13-4:6), and early death (4:7-19).

3:1-12—Reward for the just. If death was the end period, that would make living a virtuous life obscured. But here the Wisdom writer is saying that the souls of those who live just lives are in the hand of God. Life with God after death is the reward for just living on earth. The just die with the hope of continuing life, whereas the foolish expect nothing. Chastisement of the just (v.5) is not denied; its brevity is emphasized. Verses 10-12 focus on the punishment that will come to the wicked.

3:13 to 4:6—Childlessness. Here we have a contrast between the just who are childless and the wicked (the adulterer) who have children. The author says that the sterile woman will have “fruit” on the day of accounting (v.13), whereas the “fruit” of the wicked will be useless. Where there appears to be fruitlessness in the virtuous, there will be fruit. Where there appears to be fruit in injustice, there is no lasting fruit. 4:1-6 is a contrast between the virtuous and the wicked: It is better to be childless with virtue, than to have many children amid sin.

4:7-20—Early death. These verses are often used as a first reading for the funeral Mass of a young person. The good dying young contradicts the biblical

teaching that length of days is a sign of divine favor. Here the writer chooses *quality* of life over *quantity* of years. Grey hairs do not necessarily symbolize a virtuous life. Traditional wisdom teaches that things are not always what they seem. Verses 10-12 offer another reason for an early death: God snatches the virtuous young person out of a very sinful environment in case he would be defiled by it.

Pause: What would you say to a childless couple seeking to have a child, and to parents dealing with the loss of a child, teenager or young adult?

CHAPTER 5: The fate of the just and unjust

“Then shall the just one with great assurance confront his oppressors who set at nought his labors.” (v.1)

The wicked says: *“...This is he whom once we held as a laughingstock and as a type for mockery, fools that we were! His life we accounted madness, and his death dishonored. See how he is accounted among the sons of God; how his lot is with the saints!”* (vv 3-5).

This chapter concentrates on the consequences of both evil and just living, the result of the quest for Wisdom. We have a reflection from the wicked (vv 3-13) followed by a description of the just at the time of judgment.

Verses 4-13—Confession of the wicked. The wicked are forced to admit that “the death of the just is not a final and tragic end” (vv 4-5); the wicked’s paths of lawlessness and exploitation bring only destruction (vv 6-7). Their arrogance and wealth have not provided profit (v.8). As a result, their lives have become the meaningless and hopeless reality that they fear mortality has decreed for all human beings (vv 9-14).

Verses 15-23 describe the rewards of the just (the wise). Verses 20-23 state that the forces of creation will join in the battle against evil. In summary, this chapter underlines the great and important truth that at judgment time, the just or wise will fare well, while the wicked or unjust will be wiped out. The overall purpose of the Wisdom writer in these first chapters is to encourage and sustain the just in time

of persecution by reminding them of the rewards that await them at death.

CHAPTER 6:1-21: Exhortation to the powerful to seek Wisdom

“Hear therefore, kings and understand; learn you magistrates ... authority was given to you by the Lord ... yet you did not walk according to the will of God.” (vv 1-4)

“To you therefore, O princes, are my words addressed, that you may learn Wisdom....” (v.9)

“Desire therefore my words; long for them and you shall be instructed.” (v.11)

“Resplendent and unfading is Wisdom, and she is readily perceived by those who love her...” (v.12)

The first major section of this book concludes with another exhortation to seek Wisdom. Verses 1-4 are addressed to the powerful on earth, whose works will be subject to God’s scrutiny. In verses 12-21, the author praises Wisdom and outlines the blessings for those who seek her out.

PART 2: PRAISE OF WISDOM BY SOLOMON (6:22 to 11:1)

CHAPTERS 6:22 to 8:21: Solomon prayed for Wisdom and she came to him

“Therefore I prayed, and prudence was given me; I pleaded, and the spirit of Wisdom came to me. I preferred her to scepter and throne, and deemed riches nothing in comparison with her, nor did I liken any priceless gem to her; because all gold, in view of her, is a little sand, and before her, silver is to be accounted mire.” (7:7-9)

In this section, the author gives Solomon the pulpit allowing him to speak in praise of Wisdom. Part 2 has seven units all concerned with Wisdom, e.g., seeking Wisdom (7:7-12), Wisdom’s qualities (7:22-8:1), Wisdom’s activities in history (ch. 10).

6:22-25. Jealousy cannot be associated with Wisdom, since the Wisdom teacher must not claim selfish possession of her.

7:1-7—Solomon is human like the rest of us. Because Solomon is human like the rest of us, he knows he needs to pray for the gift of Wisdom.

Having received the gift of Wisdom, he values her more than silver and gold (7:7-12).

7:13-22. Solomon prays for the grace to speak well of Wisdom.

7:23 to 8:1 describe some of the qualities of God. One who seeks Wisdom is automatically a friend of God (7:27).

8:2-8. As in 7:13-22, Solomon seeks the gift of Wisdom. *“Her I have sought after from youth”* (8:2).

8:7 mentions what traditionally we have called the “four cardinal virtues”: *moderation* or temperance, *prudence*, *justice* and *fortitude*. The term ‘cardinal’ comes from the Latin word *cardo* meaning hinge. All human virtues are hinged to or related to one of the cardinal virtues.

8:9-21 reiterates 7:7-12 telling us how Solomon sought Wisdom as his most cherished companion.

CHAPTER 9: Solomon’s prayer for Wisdom

“Give me Wisdom, the attendant at your throne, and reject me not from among your children; for I am your servant, the son of your handmaid, a man weak and short-lived and lacking in comprehension of judgment and of laws. Indeed, though one be perfect among the sons of men, if Wisdom, who comes from you, be not with him, he shall be held in no esteem.” (vv 4-6)

“Send her forth from your holy heavens and from your glorious throne dispatch her that she may be with me and work with me, that I may know what is your pleasure. For she knows and understands all things, and will guide me discreetly in my affairs and safeguard me by her glory; thus my deeds will be acceptable, and I shall judge your people justly and be worthy of my father’s throne.” (vv 10-12)

The eloquent prayer for Wisdom in this chapter is regarded by many scholars as the high point of this book. Key themes in the prayer are: Wisdom’s presence when God created humanity (vv 1-6), Solomon’s need for Wisdom as he seeks to rule his people (vv 7-13), the limitations of humans to understand the things of God (vv 13-18).

CHAPTER 10: Wisdom’s activities in human history

“She delivered the first-formed father of the world when he alone had been created and she raised him from his fall.” (v.1)

“She delivered the just man from the wicked who were being destroyed....” (v.6)

“She took them across the Red Sea and brought them through the deep waters.” (v.18)

The author recounts Wisdom’s presence and activity with seven heroes in Israel’s past. He does not mention them by name since they would have been known to the reader. Seven sets of contrasts are mentioned to underline the positive function of Wisdom in the lives of the just: Adam/Cain (vv 1-3), Noah/flooded earth (v. 4), Abraham/the nations put to confusion (v. 5), Lot/the five cities and Lot’s wife (vv 6-8), Jacob/Esau and Laban (vv 9-12), Joseph/Potiphar’s wife (vv 13-14), Israel-Moses/Pharaoh-enemies (vv 15-21). In each case, Wisdom is understood to have accompanied the righteous in their trials in order to protect them and bring them success. Scholars wonder about the mention of Adam and how Wisdom protected him. Maybe she was with him when he named all the animals.

PART 3: WISDOM’S PRESENCE WITH THE ISRAELITES DURING THE EXODUS (CHAPTERS 11-19)

The Exodus is the most important event in Israel’s history. In this event, God led a formerly enslaved people into the desert, formed them into a people and protected them during the years in the desert. During the Exodus event, God protected the righteous or just and punished the wicked. In and through a series of contrasts, the Wisdom writer in chapters 11-15 shows how God was with his people and how he punished their enemies. We should note that in these chapters, the author takes liberty by adding details that are not in the original book. Also, we will notice a couple of digressions as the writer seeks to show us how God providentially protected the Israelites on their journey.

11:2-5 – Introduction. These verses sets the tone for this entire section. Israel benefits by the very things God uses to punish her enemies.

11:6-14—First example: water. The point or teaching here is that God punished the Egyptians

with impure water (Ex 7:17-24), but blessed Israel with pure water.

11:15-1—Second example: animals. These two verses begin a long sequence which will be interrupted. The Egyptians are senseless, or irrational, since they worship dumb animals.

11:17 to 12:22—Digression on God's mercy. God's mercy extends to all. Only human's choice of sin keeps them from God. The progressive nature of the plagues reveals God's attempt to teach the Egyptians a lesson. If they had responded to God, they would not have suffered so much.

13:1 to 15:17—Second digression on false worship. Concerning this digression, *The Collegeville Bible Handbook* states:

This section divides into two parts: on nature worship and on idol worship. The author's tone in the first part (13:1-9) is remarkably peaceful. The theme (v.1 & v.9) is: God's human creatures should be able to see God's power at work in the world.

The second part (13:10-15:17) has three major sections (13:11-14:11; 13:12-15:6; 15:7-13), with a reflection on the Egyptians (15:14-17). Following the usual pattern, a theme statement opens the section (v.10): far worse than nature worship is the worship of human artifacts. God made the heavens, but humans made idols – the ultimate foolishness. These idols, unlike the sun and moon ("governors of the world," (v.2), are useless.

The author's teaching on the origin and evils of idol worship (14:12-15:6) is the centerpiece of the entire section and is remarkable for its sensitive analysis (like that in 13:1-9). The theme (vv.12-14) lays out the evil of idol worship: besides being folly in itself, it leads to other sin (v.12). A second satire on idol-makers appears in 15:7-13.

The writer concludes with a set of reflections on the guilt of the Egyptians (15:14-17). They are foolish, not wise like Israel (15:14). (pp 163-164)

A key point in this section is that the beauty of creation should have led pagans to the worship of the Creator and *not* to the worship of the things he made.

15:18 to 16:15—The second example resumed and concluded. Resuming the reflection left off in 12:27 on the worship of animals, the author again contrasts Egypt and Israel (15:18 to 16:48 and 16:5-10).

16:16-29—Third example: manna and plagues. Using the examples of plagues and manna, this section is intended to show divine protection for Israel, contrasted with proportionate punishment for Egypt.

17:1 to 18:4—Fourth example: darkness and light. The author writes about the darkness afflicting Egypt (vv 2-21) treated as a moral condition as well as a physical reality. Comments on light for Israel (18:1-4) conclude the example (*Collegeville Bible Handbook*, p.165).

Fifth example: death of the first born. This final example contrasts the death of the Egyptians with the extraordinary deliverance of the Israelites. The final verse of the book (v.22) praises God for his providential care of the Israelites on every occasion.

Resources

- The Collegeville Bible Commentary—Old Testament
- The Collegeville Bible Handbook
- The New Interpreters Bible – Volume Five