



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 7 Commentary Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs
Lesson 8 Questions The Book of Wisdom

ECCLESIASTES AND SONG OF SONGS

ECCLESIASTES

INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew name of this book is Qoheleth which means a preacher, one who speaks in the assembly of believers. The Latin form, the book's name in our Bible, is a word for a church assembly, similar to the Spanish "iglesia" which developed from the Latin "ecclesia." Scholars like to call the writer Qoheleth, the Hebrew form, so it is used mostly today.

This preacher had a problem—the same one as Job had: Do virtue and vice get their rewards on this earth? Job had hard sufferings, but Qoheleth, in good health, has no happiness for he sees keenly the inability of this life to satisfy human longings (Ecclesiastes 3:21, 9:10, 12:7). Yet Qoheleth has faith in God (Ecclesiastes 3:11-14, 7:13-14). He believes that humans must keep the Commandments and fear God (Ecclesiastes 12:13), and must accept the sorrows and joys that God sends. This, to Christians, is an imperfect wisdom for, as St. Paul says, "May I never boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ga-

latians 6:14). The wisdom of the Saints was to welcome the cross of Christ.

Qoheleth lived at a time when Hebrew thought was at a crossroads—he knew Egyptian literature, Mesopotamian literature, and the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, yet he writes in late Hebrew; there are some Aramian words and two words from Persia; Palestine was under the Ptolemies, so was affected by the humanistic influence of these Egyptian rulers.

Though so melancholy, Qoheleth is a stage in the religious development of Israel; he warns of the attachment to the goods of this world, and that the rich aren't made happy with their material possessions. He never surrendered the conviction that God is sovereign in human affairs.

A. CHOICE WISDOM FROM ECCLESIASTES

1. The Right Time (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

a. "Vanity of Vanities, all is vanity..."
(Ecclesiastes 1:2)

To this the author of IMITATION OF CHRIST adds:

“Save loving God, and serving Him alone.”

b. “There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under the heavens

A time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to uproot the plant.

A time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to tear down, and a time to build

A time to weep and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance

A time to scatter stones, and a time to gather them

a time to embrace, and a time to be far from embraces.

A time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to cast away.

A time to rend, and a time to sew,

a time to be silent, and a time to speak.

A time to love, and a time to hate;

a time of war, and a time of peace.”

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

“God has made everything appropriate to its time, and has put the timeless into their hearts...”

(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

“It is better to listen to the wise man’s rebuke than to harken to the song of fools...”

(Ecclesiastes 7:5)

“Sleep is sweet to the laboring man,

Whether he eats little or much,

but the rich man’s abundance allows him no sleep.” (Ecclesiastes 5:11)

“Cast your bread upon the waters,

and it will come back to you.”

(Ecclesiastes 11:1)

“The last word, when all is heard: Fear God and keep his commandments for this is man’s all: because God will bring to judgment every work,

with all its hidden qualities, whether good or bad” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

St. Jerome, who translated the entire Bible from Greek into Latin, explained the words “Man’s all”: “To this every man is born that, knowing his Maker, he may revere him in fear, honor, and the observance of his commandments.”

For us, the wisdom of a saint’s explanation, and the wisdom of a pre-Christian believer in God whose words are God’s word, are ours to carry out.

THE SONG OF SONGS

INTRODUCTION

In exquisite poetry, the Song of Songs portrays true love between the Shepherd/King and His bride. It found its way into the holy Scriptures and follows the tradition of the prophets as a description of God’s love and our return of love (Jeremiah 2:2, Ezekiel 16:8). The Hebrews, therefore, saw the SONG as a sublime description of the spiritual union of the Chosen People with their God in “uprightness, in love and mercy” (Hosea 2:21).

The great mystical theologian of the Church, Saint John of the Cross, saw the SONG also as the spiritual development and final union of a baptized soul with God. His accounts of this in his writings: *THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL*, *THE SPIRITUAL CANTICLE* and *THE FLAME OF LOVE*, all in sublime Spanish poetry, earned him the title of the greatest poet of Spain. His writings describe the stages which a Christian, responding to God’s Presence within, will and must experience to reach the sublime union with God—the Beatific Vision. He points out that what is not reached here, must be done in purgatory, for “nothing unprepared or defiled can enter heaven” (*Dark Night*, Chapter 12, Book 2).

On earth, it is possible to be cleansed through love and union with God. St. John tries to describe this process in his book *SPIRITUAL CANTICLE*. He tells us that the poetic verses “were composed in a love flowing from abundant mystical understanding.” Such an understanding can be called also mystical wisdom or theology. Spiritual persons call it contemplation (Canticle 27, 5). This process must be directed by one who has knowledge, personal and theological, of such experience, advises St. John of the Cross. He, like St. Teresa of Avila, warns of the efforts of the spirits of evil, which they also experienced, and of the possibility of deception. However, both agree that such a gift of grace, and such progress in union with God is for all, laity and religious and clergy.

Scholars have researched the cultures and the times of this biblical book, for although it was interpreted by the Hebrews as pertaining to God and His Chosen People, it had a basis in the courtship and marriage customs of the Near East at that time. Since Solomon is mentioned twice, it was called the Song of Solomon; but its late language shows it as a post-exilic work; for instance, its use of a Persian word for Paradise hints at a stay in exile under the Persians, who conquered Babylonia and later freed the Hebrews from that captivity. However, the Song of Songs was mainly based on the love lyrics of ancient Egypt; its approach is similar to their accounts, also in sublime poetry, of love between the sexes. This literature is far above our degraded view of sex in many authors and TV/films today.

In these notes, we briefly comment on the Hebrew meanings and on what it means to us.

I. EARLY COURTSHIP (Song of Songs 1:1-5:16)

A. The Bride and Her Companions (Song of Songs 1:1-2:7). The Song begins with a bride who already loves, has advanced thus far and feels great longing for the Beloved, which she expresses in verses 2-4: a longing for a token

of love, a love of his Name, which spreads perfume and makes even the maidens, her friends, love him. Her request becomes an ardent cry: “Draw me!” and is joined by the maidens: “We will follow you eagerly!... with you we rejoice and exult, we praise your love; it is beyond wine. How rightly you are loved!”

This is a description of all the Church, attracted to God and willing to follow him “eagerly” (Song of Songs 4).

The Bride and the “Daughters of Jerusalem,” her companions, speak of her love for the Shepherd/King, who is absent, but spoken of as though he was present. Her descriptions of her loved one and his of her are taken from nature scenes, animals, and the customs of the times.

Her exclamation, “Draw me” as though spoken to her love (Song of Songs 1:4) is used by St. Thérèse of Lisieux in her account of her attraction to God, and by St. John of the Cross, to explain the desire to follow Christ and to be united with him.

B. The Lover Comes—and Goes (Song of Songs 2:8-3:11). The Bride sees the lover coming, and he stands behind her wall. His first words invite her to come to the hills with him, “Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come” (Song of Songs 2:10). “As a lily among thorns, so is my beloved among women.” These lines are used several times in the Church’s liturgy, and are usually referred to Our Lady. St. John of the Cross explains the words “Catch the little foxes that damage the vineyards!” (Song of Songs 2:15) as the faults and little sins of one working at conversion of self, which damage our relationship with Christ, our union with God.

In the next chapter there is a sudden change: as she delays somewhat, the lover is gone. The search begins in restless desire to find him. She eulogizes him as being Solomon with his sixty valiant men, as though he were a King David, or

King Solomon. She says to her companions: “Daughters of Jerusalem, come forth and look upon King Solomon...” (Song of Songs 3:11).

C. The Charms of the Beloved (Song of Songs 4:1-16). The bride’s physical beauty is described in terms of suggestion rather than literally: her hair as black as the famous black goats of Gilead... her complexion like the glow of a pomegranate...

The fine poetry in Song of Songs 4:12-16 compares the bride to an enclosed garden which is interpreted as her virginity, reserved for him alone. Her fidelity is implied as “a fountain sealed,” bringing to us, the readers of today, a sad realization that few “virgins” of our time are reserved for their future husbands.

St. John of the Cross used this passage to refer to the gift a loving soul gives to God as a bride, reserving her greatest love for Him. If other loves separate a soul from God, they have a falseness in them which prevents them from being “forever.” There will perhaps be an eternal separation.

D. The Lost Lover (Song of Songs 5:2-16). “I sought him, but I did not find him. I called to him, but he did not answer me.” Commentators of the spiritual journey toward God see in this verse a description of “The Dark Night” of contemplation, as one progresses in a prayer life. At first, it is all so joyful an experience, to be attracted by and to find God in one’s life. But this beginning must develop into a weaning away from a mere acquaintance with God, so He begins to withdraw us from a surface peace and joy in the soul. He gradually purifies the soul’s search, which may be mere desire for spiritual self-satisfaction, although truly searching for the divine relationship: the withdrawal is only to deepen the ability to love.

The “daughters of Jerusalem” are called in to help find the loved one, and the bride describes him in glowing terms. When the daughters are so

impressed that they seem to plan to seek him themselves, the bride refuses their offer!

II. DISCOVERY (Song of Songs 6-8)

Suddenly, the bride speaks of her lover’s presence in “his garden”—she herself is the garden where he “gathers the lilies.” As he praises her charms, he claims that a whole “harem” can not praise her enough, and that she alone is “my dove.” Catholic scholars see in this the incomparable Virgin Mary “coming forth like the dawn, as beautiful as the moon, as resplendent as the sun” (Song of Songs 6:10).

The beauty of the bride is further described in her physical beauty and promise; a reference is made to her fertility, and the passage ends with a cry by the lover, for the coming union. At this, they arrive at her home, and the relatives come into the scene. The most touching and beautiful lines are spoken here by the bride: “set me as a seal upon your heart... Deep waters cannot quench love,” and the crowning words: “were one to offer all he owns to purchase love, he would be roundly mocked” (Song of Songs 8:7).

The ending seems tacked on, for it shows her answering her worried brothers, laughing at them and affirming her chastity, but claiming to be “ripe for marriage.”

This poetic love story, placed in the Bible, has always, by both Jews and Christians, been seen as a union between God and His chosen People, between Infinite Love, and each faithful and loving soul.

A well-loved and much read modern allegory, with a title from the prophet Habakkuk (Habakkuk 3:19), “HINDS” FEET ON HIGH PLACES by Hannah Hurnard, is based on the Song of Songs. The author, herself once a stutterer, fearful of people, finally found freedom from it through trust and faith in Jesus and in dedicating herself entirely to work for Him.

She wrote her book about Much-Afraid, a member of the Fearing family. Crippled and with a crooked mouth, she was also threatened with a marriage to her cruel cousin, Craven Fear. Much-Afraid had chosen to work for the Chief Shepherd of the valley and she ran to him one day for help to escape from such a handicapped and threatened life. The Chief Shepherd quietly told her that he had been waiting for her decision to escape this valley and to let him guide her to the High Places, to His Father's Kingdom, the Realm of Love.

As she walked to her little cottage that night, she sang to herself an old Song that she had heard the shepherds sing:

“The Song of Songs,” the loveliest song,
 The song of love, the king,
 No joy on earth compares with him,
 But seems a broken thing.
 His name as ointment is poured forth,
 And all his lovers sing.

Draw me—I will run after you,
 You are my heart's one choice,
 Oh, bring me to your royal house,
 To dwell there and rejoice.
 There, in your presence, O my King
 To feast and hear your voice.

Look not upon me with contempt,
 Though soiled and marred I be,
 The King found me—an outcast thing—
 and set his love on me.
 I shall be perfected by Love,

Made fair as day to see.”
 (Canticle 1:1-6)

The Shepherd had told her to remember the words of Habakkuk 3:19: “The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like Hinds' Feet, and he will make me walk upon my High Places.”

We accompany Much-Afraid on her many slips, her near falls, her terrible fears, her detour through a desert, decided upon by the Shepherd; and to a lovely fountain on her way back to the climb. All of the story neatly describes the journey of a soul to “the high places of God,” with the agility of a Hind's Feet on High Places.

“Oh you whom my soul loves,
 Tell me where you do feed,
 And where your flocks at noonday
 To rest and browse do lead.
 For why should I
 By others be,
 And not by thee?

O fairest of women,
 Do you indeed not know?
 Then lead your little flock
 The Way that my flocks go;
 And be to me,
 As I to thee,
 Sweet company.”
 (Canticle 1:7, 8)

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 8
The Book of Wisdom

Day 1 Read the Notes.

a. Which of the two short books did you enjoy most?

b. Quote from the lecture notes what helped you.

Day 2 Read Wisdom 1:1-3:12. As you go, choose two quotes to share with others.

a. Share these quotes.

b. What did you learn for your life in these “words of wisdom”?

c. What church teachings about human beings is in Wisdom 2:23 and 24 and 3:1-8?

Day 3 Read Wisdom 3:13 - 5:23, 2 Thessalonians 1:6f and Colossians 2:15.

a. What comfort can come to some friends of God from verses 3:13 - 4:6?

b. What do these lines teach or imply to Christians who believe in aborting children?

c. Quote a line from Wisdom 4:7-5:23 that encourages you in your life.

Day 4 Read Wisdom 6:1 - 9:18. As you go, underline quotes you like.

- a. What can Wisdom 6:1-21 say to parents and/or “bosses”?

- b. Choose a verse or two to quote.

Day 5 Read Wisdom 11:1-16, Exodus 7:5-24.

- a. What did this teach the later Israelites who read this? You today?

- b. Read Wisdom 13:1-9 and comment briefly on this.

- c. Read Wisdom 13:10-19. How can a person use Wisdom to discover God?

Day 6 Read Wisdom 14:12-31.

- a. What wisdom is in this reading?

- b. Read Wisdom 15:1-17. How does this impress you?

- c. Read Wisdom 16:20-21. How do these verses apply to us?

- d. Read Wisdom 18:14-15. How does this refer to a doctrine of our faith?