



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

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SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 8 Commentary The Book of Wisdom
Lesson 9 Questions The Book of Sirach

THE BOOK OF WISDOM

INTRODUCTION

The Roman Empire extended its rule over much of the known world when this book was written around 100 years before Christ. One of these areas was in Alexandria in Egypt, named after the great conqueror Alexander from northern Greece. Well-educated and generous to his conquests, the emperor and his delegates made Alexandria famous for its learning; one of the best libraries in the empire was there. The Jewish colony there was a large one when the Romans took over the area.

One of the Jews of Alexandria wrote this beautiful book in Greek, but in the Hebrew verse style. As so many scholars and writers did, he wrote in Solomon's name, calling it the Wisdom of Solomon. Because the writer wrote in Greek, the Jews of the Pharisee party who gathered their scholars together around 90 years after Christ to determine their sacred books, omitted this book. Yet its writer, like Sirach, was outstanding in his learning and religious devotion, one of their sages in post-exilic Judaism.

At that time, a popular subject of the educated classes was the worth and the importance of wisdom. After the first 6 chapters devoted to topics very important for us, the author turns to the "Wisdom of Solomon," and from it to the Providence of God during the Exodus, which is the longest section.

The first ten chapters prepared for the teachings of Christ and His Church, and are often quoted in the liturgy of the Church, some of them quite prophetic for the coming of Christ. All of the New Testament was written in Greek.

An interesting point about its Greek language is that Greek was the written language of the empire, having been spread over Alexander the Great's extensive conquests in the known world. A familiar form used by most merchants and travelers was "koine," a sort of vernacular form of Greek. Jesus and the apostles knew and spoke this form, although the language that Jesus and the Galileans used was Aramaic, a rather well-developed language, the commercial Semitic language long used in southwest Asia. The Jews were a Semitic people.

I. WISDOM IN HUMAN LIFE

A. The Key to Life: Justice. “Love justice, you who judge the earth; think of the Lord in goodness, and seek him in integrity of heart” (Wisdom 1:1). These beginning words speak not of “fair play,” giving just due, but of moral righteousness, a moral quality which produces moral conduct. Without this, society degenerates. Rulers, says the writer, should love such justice, and he next speaks of the LORD of both rulers and subjects. All should think of Him as good. Also included is that they should be good, have integrity of heart. Otherwise, the LORD will not manifest himself to them, for “perverse counsels separate a man from God and his power rebukes the fool.”

God sees and witnesses the inmost self of all of us, observes our hearts and listens to our tongues. But, most importantly, the “spirit of the Lord fills the world,” wickedness does not go unnoticed (Wisdom 1:7-8). So, we are cautioned, “guard against jealousy, grumbling, calumny and a ‘lying mouth,’” or we draw to ourselves “destruction by the works of our hands,” and the words of our mouths. An interesting comment in this chapter is “Because God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living” (Wisdom 1:13, 2 Peter 3: 9, Isaiah 51:6ff).

B. Death and Immorality (Wisdom 1:16 - 3:12). “It was the wicked who with hands and words invited death” (Wisdom 1:16). These consider their lifetime a brief period and even invite it for it brings a nothingness to their bodies (“will be ashes”) and to their souls (“poured abroad like air”). Their strength is their norm of justice, so they openly decide to “beset the just one,... because he sets himself against our doings” (Wisdom 2:12). And following this, the author gives a description of the “just one” whom the wicked describe which is a strong likeness to the events and the character of Jesus in his rejection and suffering (Wisdom 2:12-20). “He calls blessed the destiny of the just and boasts that God is his Fa-

ther... let us condemn him to a shameful death; let us find out just what will happen to him... ” (Wisdom 2:16b-17a). “But they erred,” writes the author, “they knew not the hidden counsels of God; neither did they count on recompense of holiness, nor discern the innocent souls’ reward,” and here the author clearly states the truths put in the book of Genesis: “For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of His Own Nature He made him, but by the envy of the devil, death entered the world...” (Wisdom 2:22-24). The doctrine set forth here was revealed and inspired, yet how much, much more has been revealed to us: God himself became a man who suffered for all other people and taught us of our own resurrection of the body, in glory or in pain, forever. The beautiful words of “The Hidden Counsels of God” are used by the Church in her funeral liturgies and the Divine Office of the Dead: “Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed... as gold in the furnace, he proved them, and as sacrificial offerings he took them to himself and... they shall shine, shall judge nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will be their King forever” (Wisdom 3:1-9). “But the wicked... and he who despises wisdom and instruction is doomed...” The description is not desirable!

The author goes further and writes about childless women who knew not transgression of the marriage bed; for “she shall bear fruit at the visitation of souls.” Childlessness was a great sorrow for Hebrew women; to bring others into life was an honor, and to be deprived of it was a real deprivation, especially because their family would die out and the People of God not be enriched through them, for they were the “Chosen People” of God. The very opposite of this attitude is claimed triumphantly today; to prevent a child is a right and even a duty acclaimed by our society, by too many. Only God’s enemy, the Evil One, could bring about such a widespread error and sin against God. The author of Wisdom continues applauding those who, like “eunuchs”—men who can not produce children or are made that way by the choice of another: “Better is childlessness with

virtue,” for “it marches crowned in triumph” (Wisdom 4:1-2).

C. The Reward of the Just (Wisdom 5:1-23). The just one at the final judgment “shall with great assurance confront the oppressors who set at nothing his labors, while they will cry: ‘Fools that we were! See how he is accounted among the sons of God and his lot is with the saints!’” (Wisdom 5:4-5). Some of the Bible’s most beautiful descriptions are here in this chapter, comparisons of the just and the deliberate rebellious against God and goodness: “the hope of the wicked is like this—tumbledown on the wind, and like fine, wind-driven foam; like smoke scattered by the wind” (Wisdom 5:14). “But the just shall receive the splendid crown, the beautiful headband from the hand of the LORD,” who shall “arm creation to repay the enemy...” (Wisdom 5:16-17).

D. Special Words to Rulers (Wisdom 6:1-21). “To you, O princes, you kings, and you who are in power over throngs of people, are my words addressed that you may learn wisdom and... shall be found holy, without sin” (Wisdom 6:1-10). Here the author exalts again over Wisdom: “resplendent and unfading... found by those who love her... to keep her laws is the basis for incorruptibility.” Amazing words from an Old Testament writer who knew not of the resurrection planned for all. Beside the unique holiness and triumph of Christ over death, in Christian history there are more than two hundred incorruptible bodies of holy people. There is a book of researches and pictures of these holy ones, including one of Bernadette of Lourdes, who is so beautiful in her preservation that it is amazing (THE INCORRUPTIBLES).

II. THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON (Wisdom 6:22-9:18)

The great model of a ruler for the Jews, was David’s son, King Solomon (1 Kings 3:4-15), whom our Scripture Study presents to us in the introductory chapters to the PROPHETS, Series

IV. All of us, says Solomon, are one in our entry into life, and in our leaving it; no king has any different origin or birth” (Wisdom 7:6). “I prayed, I pleaded, and the spirit of Wisdom came to me. I preferred her to scepter and throne” (Wisdom 7:7-8). Do we believe this: “All gold (money) in view of her, is a little sand, and before her silver (coins) is to be accounted mire” (Wisdom 7:9). The wisdom that God speaks of here is not head knowledge, it is soul knowledge—it is a knowing that leads us to choose good over evil, to desire God above all temporal things because He is the one perfect Being, and we recognize that He “has made us for Himself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Him” (St. Augustine in his autobiography, THE CONFESSIONS). St. Augustine knew what he said, for he had been a great sinner—poor morals and renouncing Christianity for a false religion. Yet he learned Wisdom (which is GOD in us) one day when he heard a child in the streets crying: “Take and read, Take and read.” Almost instinctively, he opened the book his mother had put in his hands, the Bible, and he read: “Let us live honorably as in daylight, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy, rather put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the desires of the flesh” (Romans 13:13-14).

To read in these chapters is also to find moving descriptions of the wisdom of goodness and strength of mind and will; it draws us into an experience of sheer beauty of Being, in which we have a share, being made and designed by Almighty Goodness. In Chapter 10, God’s “good men,” from Adam (who was created a perfect human being) and some of the Biblical persons we all know, are cleverly recalled, down to Moses, and his people whom he led to the Promised Land. We have one, too, and we are journeying through our desert and our travels and mishaps there, now. Always look at our goal, not life here, for it is not our destination!

In Chapter 11 a special section begins.

III. THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN THE EXODUS (Wisdom 11:2 - 19:22)

This is a sort of “midrash,” a commentary by the author on the Bible’s account of the escape on Passover Night, from slavery to freedom, but not after a long trek in a desert, finally bringing the persevering ones to a “Promised Land” a land of “milk and honey”—the plenteous area of the “Holy Land.” Parts of this account contain short little meditations on the actions and goodness of God. Read quietly, they give us an inner light and peace, a feeling of gratitude that we know God (Wisdom 11:17-26). The first of these, on Mercy, another on False Worship (Chapters 13-16), are placed in between the events of the journey to the Holy Land. Beginning with Adam and going up to Moses, the writer shows Wisdom’s work in history. This account is similar to Psalm 107.

A. Plagues and Blessings. Chapter 11:5 gives us the main theme, the intention of the writer to tell us:

“For by the things through which their foes were punished, they in their turn, benefited.”

What were plagues to the Egyptians and their king, became blessings to the Hebrews.

1. Water (Wisdom 11:6-14). Instead of a spring, the Nile turned into “impure blood,” a reddish dangerous plague. But in the desert, the Israelites drew water from the rock (Exodus 17:5-7, Numbers 20:8-11).

2. The Egyptians who worshipped dumb creatures such as serpents endured a plague of frogs, while the Israelites were fed by quails flying down to earth for them (Exodus 7:26ff and 16:13).

3. Instead of the hail which rained down upon Egypt, the Israelites found fine flakes which came down from the sky on the desert sand for their food (Exodus 16:14-15).

4. Shackled with darkness in a unbarred prison, the Egyptians were sickened with ridiculous fears while the Israelites had very great light, for they followed a flaming pillar of fire guiding them through the desert.

5. While the firstborn, animal or people, were put to death by a destroying angel, the “holy children of the good were offering sacrifice and putting into effect the divine institution of Passover” for “peaceful stillness encompassed everything, and the night in its swift course was half spent, Your all-powerful word from heaven’s royal throne bounded into the doomed land” (Wisdom 18:14-15).

After the death of the first-born of Egypt, the writer tells us that “the trial of death touched at one time even the just, and in the desert a plague struck the multitude, yet not for long, for the blameless man hastened to be their champion; he stood in the midst and checked the anger... For on his full-length robe was the whole world, and the glories of the fathers were carved in four rows upon the stones” (Wisdom 18:20-24).

Afterwards, “...all creation, in its several kinds, was being made anew, serving its natural laws, that your children might be preserved unharmed... out of what had been water, dry land was seen emerging: Out of the Red Sea an unimpeded road, and a grassy plain out of the mighty flood. Over this crossed the whole nation sheltered by your hand... they bounded about like lambs, praising you, O Lord, their deliverer!” (Wisdom 19:7-9).

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Day 4

- a. Read Sirach 4:11, 19:17-26. Summarize these readings in a paragraph and give a title to it.

- b. Read Sirach 30:1-13, 42:9-14. What is the topic of these texts and how important is it?

- c. Which of these verses is wisest in your judgment? Why?

Day 5 Read Sirach 10:19-30, 21:1-10.

- a. In these wisdom sayings, what helped you the most?

- b. Skim from Sirach 24:26-31 to 27:1-21. What wisdom in these is greatly needed in our world today?

- c. Read Sirach 34:13-17, 35:1-24. Choose some sayings that touched or helped you and explain what it says to you.

Day 6

- a. Read the reflection on Nature in Sirach 43. What description do you like best?

- b. Read Sirach 44:1-15. If you have ever had a family reunion, what lines describe such an occasion?

- c. Choose one of Israel's great leaders from Sirach 44:16 - 50:24 and share what you learned or give lines that impressed you.