

Wisdom 1-3

We do not know the name of the author of The Wisdom of Solomon. He was a Jew living and teaching in Alexandria probably during the Roman period, that is, sometime in the last decades of the first century BC or the early decades of the first century AD. There are many parallels with the writings of his contemporary, Philo (c. 25BC – 45AD), the most famous Jew living in Alexandria at the time

It is evident from his writing that the author of The Wisdom of Solomon was well versed in the Jewish Scriptures, and also in Hellenist religious and philosophical thought. The mood of the Hellenist writings of the period was consciously religious and inclusive, and there was much interchange of ideas between the Middle Platonists, the Epicureans and the Stoics. This would have been very attractive to our author's Jewish students. It provided a challenge to their traditional faith, but also opportunities. Their teacher, the author of the book we are studying, was keen to make as many connections as he could with contemporary Hellenist culture.

If Judaism remained locked into the traditional Hebrew way of looking at the world, there was a danger that non-Jews would see Judaism as standing in the way of civilization, human progress, and the unity of mankind to which they aspired. To counteract this our author encouraged his students to engage with Hellenist thought, while recognising its limits and defects, and to value the special contribution their own Jewish traditions could make to the culture. He writes enthusiastically of the temple (9:8), the Torah (18:4), the heroes of Israel (10:1-21), and begins his work by referring to the prophetic ideal of justice (1:1). It is their privileged mission as Jews to offer the world 'the incorruptible light of the Torah'(18:4).

Another feature of life in Alexandria at the time was the mystical cult of the Egyptian goddess, Isis. This, too, had many attractions for a Jew who was keen to find a place in the vibrant world that was Alexandria. This was especially attractive in light of the fact that they did not have a temple in Alexandria and so felt the absence of the cult that was so important to their fellow Jews in Judea.

His Jewish students for whom this work is composed must have been educated in Greek literature, philosophy, rhetoric and science, as well as in their own Jewish traditions. Their teacher is encouraging them to learn from the best of Hellenist philosophy and religion, but he is insisting that God had chosen for them a priceless gift to offer their contemporaries. The key point that our author makes throughout the book is that what was good in Hellenist culture was a gift of divine Wisdom from YHWH, the personal God who chose to reveal himself to the Jews.

The highest expression of divine Wisdom is the Torah, and the Torah is God's corrective to the errors in Hellenist thought, and the means of bringing to perfection its limited insights. Our author's hope is that this will also appeal to the cultured non-Jews in Alexandria who were attracted to Judaism.

He draws on the Biblical traditions of creation, of the presence and action of God in the history of Israel, and in the reflections on divine Wisdom as found especially in the Book of Proverbs and in The Wisdom of Ben Sira. However, while he draws on these traditions he chooses to use the language, not of the Septuagint, but of Hellenist literature and of the Isis cult. The Book of Proverbs contains ancient Hebrew wisdom. Ben Sira, like our author, was a teacher, but he was writing two centuries earlier in Jerusalem and in Hebrew. Our author lived in a very different world and in a very different time, with a very different language and intellectual culture.

He sees the key defect of current Hellenistic thought as its failure to recognise YHWH, the One, Living God, the personal God of Judaism, Creator of all that is. This God is revealed through Wisdom (9:2-6), through his Word (16:2; 18:15-16), especially in the Torah (16:6; 18:4), in nature (13:4-5) and in his wondrous interventions (5:2-5; 18:3).

For all their religious earnestness, Hellenist writers saw wisdom as a human achievement. For our author it is a gift from God. The initiative is always from God who wants his creatures to live in intimate communion with him. God created us to enjoy this intimate communion, and offers it as a gift to those who welcome the gift of divine Wisdom, and live accordingly. He speaks of this intimate communion, using the metaphor of sexual intimacy popular in the Isis cult (see 6:12-14; 7:28; 8:2-18).

Neither the Book of Proverbs nor the Wisdom of Ben Sira envisaged a life of communion with God after physical death. Under the influence of Hellenist thought, our author embraced the idea of human beings consisting of matter informed by a soul. With physical death the matter corrupts. The soul, however, is immortal. However, here again, he understood our immortality differently. For Plato the soul was innately indestructible. For our author, it is God who graciously offers eternal communion to those who welcome his gift of Wisdom. It is divine Wisdom that takes the initiative (6:13). We are being offered this communion even before we become conscious of its influence (7:12). It is divine Wisdom that is the source of all virtue (8:7). It is only through the gift of Wisdom that we can come to know the will of God and respond to it (9:17).

Part One (1:1 - 6:21)

The author focuses on our eternal destiny: communion with God. Divine Wisdom is God's gift drawing us into this communion, which we will enjoy only if we seek the Lord (1:1), by welcoming Wisdom and living accordingly (6:9)

1:1-3

Love justice, you who rule the earth. In goodness be mindful of the Lord, and seek him in sincerity of heart.

He is found by those who do not put him to the test, and reveals himself to those who put their trust in him.

Perverse thinking separates people from God, and when God's power is put to the test, it exposes the foolish.

I:4

**Wisdom will not enter a fraudulent soul,
or make her home in a body enslaved to sin.**

The distinction in verse 4 between the ‘soul’(ψυχή) and the ‘body’(σῶμα) is drawn, not from Jewish tradition, but from the Greek philosophers. ψυχή is used 25 times in Wisdom. σῶμα is used 5 times. When ψυχή occurs elsewhere in the Septuagint (856 times) it means ‘life’, or the ‘conscious self’ or the ‘individual person’. When σῶμα is used elsewhere in the Septuagint (114 times), where it does not mean ‘a dead body’, it, too, generally stands for the person, with the focus on a person’s physical, material reality. The idea, espoused by the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, of a human being consisting in a ‘soul’ inhabiting a ‘body’ comes from the author’s study of the contemporary Greek schools of philosophy.

I:4

Wisdom will not enter a fraudulent soul,
or make her home in a body enslaved to sin.

Our author's understanding is that the soul is immortal. The traditional Jewish wisdom, as exemplified in the Book of Proverbs and in the Wisdom of Ben Sira, is that physical death is the end of communion with God and so the end of life. What is new here in the Wisdom of Solomon is the idea that when we die physically the soul is released and the body corrupts in the grave. If we live wisely, we (that is the soul freed from the body) will enjoy communion with God, the source of life and wisdom. In verse 4 he is making the point that wisdom cannot dwell in a soul that inhabits 'a body enslaved to sin.'

For a holy and disciplined spirit will flee from deceit, will leave foolish thoughts behind, and will be ashamed at the approach of injustice.

The distinction between ‘soul’(ψυχή) and ‘spirit (πνεῦμα) is a traditional one. Whereas the ‘soul’ traditionally stands for the human person, the ‘spirit’ always includes a direct reference to God. It is the life we experience, a life (breath) that is constantly breathed into us by God. When the author here refers to the spirit as ‘holy’ he is acknowledging that it is God’s holy spirit dwelling in the soul.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me’ (Psalm 51:11).

In the Isaiah scroll we read of those who ‘rebelled and grieved YHWH’s holy spirit’ (Isaiah 63:10).

The spirit of YHWH will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of YHWH’ (Isaiah 11:2).

Wisdom is a kindly spirit, and she will not free blasphemers from the guilt of their words; because God is witness of their inmost feelings, a true observer of the heart, who hears every word.

The spirit of the Lord fills the world, and that which holds all things together knows all that is said.

‘Kindly’ in verse 6 translates φιλόανθρωπος. The spirit of wisdom is all-embracing, for God loves everything he has made. However, just as the spirit of wisdom cannot enter a deceitful soul (verse 4), so it cannot stay where there is deceit, folly or injustice. We cannot hide from God who sees our ‘innermost feelings’ (νεφρός). God is ‘true’ (ἀληθής) and sees things as they really are. He sees our ‘heart’ (καρδία) and knows everything that issues from it.

The idea of the divine spirit holding all things together was first developed by the Stoics. It is found in Philo. Paul speaks in similar terms of the risen Christ (see Colossians 1:17; see also Hebrews 1:3).

Those, therefore, who live unjustly will not escape notice, and justice, when it accuses, will not overlook them. For inquiry will be made into the scheming of the ungodly, and a report of their words will come before the Lord, to convict them of their lawless deeds.

A zealous ear hears all things, and the sound of grumbling does not go undetected. Beware then of useless grumbling, and keep your tongue from speaking evil of God; for no secret word will go unheeded, and lying speech destroys the soul.

‘Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from YHWH;
but those who miss me cause themselves harm;
all who hate me love death’(Proverbs 8:35-36).

Do not court death by the error of your life, or bring down destruction by your own actions. For God did not make death, and takes no delight in the destruction of the living. He created all things that they might endure. The generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them. The dominion of Hades is not on earth. Justice is immortal.

The author is speaking of what we might call spiritual death (compare Romans 6:23). Physical death, which is part of the human condition, comes to all and is part of God's design. 'Hades' (ᾍδης) is the underworld ruled by Death. It is God who rules the earth. Those who live unjustly are choosing destruction. Justice (δικαιοσύνη), is immortal' (ἄθάνατος). Our author draws on Plato, but he speaks, not of the indestructibility of the soul, but of an immortality that consists in eternal communion with God and is a gift from God.

1:16

The ungodly by their words and deeds have summoned Death; considering him a friend, they pined for him, and made a pact with him, for they are fit to belong to his company.

Whereas the just are faithful to the covenant (διαθήκη) made to them by God, the ungodly have made a pact (συνθήκη) with Death (an expression borrowed from Isaiah 28:15).

2:1-5

In their faulty way they reasoned, saying to themselves,

“Short and filled with trouble is our life, and there is no remedy when life comes to its end. No one has been known to return from Hades.

We came to be by mere chance, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been, for the breath in our nostrils is but a puff of smoke, and reason is a spark kindled by the beating of our hearts. When it is extinguished, the body will turn to ashes, and the life breath will scattered like the air. Our name will be forgotten with the passing of time. No one will remember our deeds; our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud, and be scattered like mist that is chased by the rays of the sun, overcome by its heat. Our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and at our end there is no coming back. It is sealed up and no one can change it.”

2:6-9

“Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things at hand, and make use of creation with youthful zest. Let us take our fill of costly wine and perfumes, and let no blossom of spring pass us by. Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they wither. Let no meadow fail to share in our revelry; everywhere let us leave signs of our enjoyment. This is our portion, our birthright.”

‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’(Isaiah 22:13).

Qohelet’s advice was to get as much enjoyment as possible from the present moment (see Ecclesiastes 9:7; 11:9), so long as we realise that ‘for all these things God will bring you to judgment’(Ecclesiastes 11:9). The godless here ignore this judgment!

“Let us use our power to oppress the righteous poor man; let us not spare the widow nor honour the gray hairs of the aged. ¹¹Let our might be the measure of our right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless. Let us lie in wait for the righteous man. His presence is inconvenient to us. He opposes what we do; he reproaches us for sinning against the law, and accuses us of being false to our training. He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. He is a living reproof of our designs; just seeing him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. We are considered by him as counterfeit. He avoids us as unclean; he pronounces happy the final lot of the righteous, and boasts that God is his father.”

The ungodly claim to see through the nonsense spoken by the poor to cover up their helpless and useless condition! How dare they make the outlandish claim that God is their ‘father’.

“Let us see if his words are true. Let us test what will happen to him at the end of his life. If the righteous man is God’s son, God will help him, and deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how reasonable he is. Let us see if he can remain clear of evil. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be delivered.”

Since the ungodly believe that everyone is really acting out of self-interest, they want to put to the test those who claim to be godly. They are convinced that when the pressure is put on the just they will prove themselves to be no better than the ungodly whom they love to criticise. The ungodly are completely confident that the claim to be under God’s protection will easily be proved false. Might will prove to be right.

We recall the words thrown at Jesus (see Matthew 27:43 and John 5:18).

Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray. Blinded by their malice, they did not know the secret purposes [μυστήρια] of God. They entertained no hope that holiness would have its reward. They passed up the prize of unblemished souls.

God, however, created man in a state of incorruption, and made man an image [εἰκὼν] of his own eternity.

It was through the devil's envy that Death entered the world, and those who belong to Death's company experience him.

If the author is alluding to the Genesis story it is one of the earliest extant Jewish texts to equate the serpent with the devil. The author here is speaking of spiritual death, not physical death. The devil does not enjoy communion with God (life), so he doesn't want human beings to have it either.

But the souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died. Their departure was thought to be a disaster, their going from us to be their destruction. But they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality.

‘Immortality’ is not the indestructibility of the soul taught by Plato. It is eternal communion with God. Our author does not argue from the nature of the soul, but presents this idea as what God offers as a gift of grace. The idea of life beyond death was being espoused by some Jews, but our author envisages this life in a new way. It will be enjoyed by the human soul, freed from the body. The just will not die because their souls are ‘in the hands of God’, the source of life.

3:5-8

Having been disciplined a little, they will be treated with great kindness, for God tested them and found them worthy of himself. Like gold in the furnace he tested them; like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will fly like sparks through the stubble.

They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will be their sovereign for all eternity.

God accepts the offering which we make of ourselves to him when we submit to the test and continue to live justly in times of trial. 'Visitation' translates ἐπισκοπή. God, in his 'great kindness' has taken the just man into his eternal embrace. On the future star-like brilliance of the just see Daniel 12:3, and in the Newer Testament Matthew 13:43.

Those who trust in him will understand the truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his those he has called, and he watches over his holy ones.

For the first time the author speaks of ‘trust’(πειθω). This is also his first mention of ‘the truth’(ἀλήθεια). In this life reality can be hidden; appearances do not always reveal what is real. We understand ‘the truth’ when reality is manifest. Reality is ultimately God, and creatures as participating in the being of God. This is the first and only time he speaks of the ‘faithful’(πιστος). It is the first of three times he speaks of ‘love’(ἀγάπη). It is the first of six times he speaks of ‘grace’(χάρις), and the first of eight times he speaks of ‘mercy’(ἔλεος). It is also the first of eight times that he speaks of God’s ‘holy ones’(ὁσίος). The nuance of ὁσίος is that the just have been taken into the realm of the sacred, away from any danger of pollution.