

Wisdom of Solomon

A SHORT GUIDE BY JERRY L. SUMNEY

THE CONTEXT

The Wisdom of Solomon is written to praise wisdom and encourage the readers to pursue wisdom, particularly through living a virtuous life. While it speaks in the name of Solomon, the king of Israel in the ninth century BCE, it was in fact written by a Jewish author who lived in Egypt, probably between 30 and 50 CE. This writer is familiar with Platonic and Stoic philosophy, as well as Hebrew history and Hebrew wisdom traditions. More specifically, the book reflects a time when Rome governed Egypt and when the Jewish community was under threat, but there is no indication that the temple in Jerusalem had yet fallen. A number of interpreters place it in the reign of the emperor Gaius (Caligula, 37-41).

SUMMARY

Much of the encouragement this book offers comes in the form of comparing the fate of the wicked with that of the righteous who seek wisdom. After a six-chapter introduction that compares the outlook and fate of the righteous and the wicked, Solomon tells of his desire to acquire wisdom and records his prayer for wisdom. Since God answered that prayer, Solomon now wants to help others attain wisdom. Beginning in chapter 10, the book traces the story of the Israelites from Adam through their taking of the land of Canaan. The focus is always on how some acted righteously and with wisdom and how others did not. Punishment and death comes to those who do not live righteously, while great benefits—including immortality—come to the righteous. The book gives extensive attention to the wickedness of Egyptians and the punishments they were given in the plagues of the exodus. The book is clear that such punishments await those who are wicked and who harm God's people. This theme is one of the indications that this book is written in Egypt for a diaspora community that is under threat from the cooperation of the native Egyptians and the Roman authorities.

In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, especially the Second Isaiah, Solomon mocks those who carve images of trees and rocks and then worship them. An account of the blessings one receives from worshipping only God accompanies this ridicule of polytheism. The book ends with an explicit assurance that God is present always and everywhere and that God always helps God's people.

This book sees Wisdom as an eternal emanation of God (7:24-30). She seems to be a separate individual with her own existence, but she shines spontaneously and necessarily out of God's glory. She is the one through whom God is most fully known and who can do all things. She is God's presence to the righteous. She also knows the future, sustains creation, and is loved by God. Solomon says that those who seek her can experience her presence. This may be a kind of mystical experience for this author. He also says that she grants immortality to those who join with her.

As central as Lady Wisdom is in the first eleven chapters, she is absent from the last eight chapters. At the end of chapter eleven she seems to merge with God, who is then the actor for the rest of the book. It is God who punishes or destroys the Canaanites and the Egyptians in the stories of the taking of the Land and the plagues of the exodus. This seems to suggest that this book sees God and Wisdom as one, even though she has a separate existence. This is not unique in the philosophical thought of the era or in Jewish writers. Philo of Alexandria, a Jew of Egypt who understood himself to be faithful to God, could also envision Wisdom or "the Word" as emanations and as separate beings and yet also in some way inseparable from God.

DIGGING DEEPER

The focus on punishment for wickedness and blessings given to the righteous seem intended to encourage the beleaguered Jewish community in Egypt to remain faithful to God. They need such encouragement because they are experiencing outside pressures and even pogroms. The stories Solomon tells notes that brief punishments come on God's people when they err, but that those difficulties are intended to encourage faithfulness. So, those reading this book could interpret their suffering as one of those moments intended to produce more faithfulness. Thus, rather than deserting the faith to join the

broader culture and so get relief, they should remain firm. After all, in the stories Solomon tells, the Israelites have brief moments of punishment, while others, especially Egyptians, are utterly destroyed. So it is better to endure a brief chastisement than to join those who will be completely destroyed.

One of the distinctive elements of this book is its view of the soul. While other Jewish writers of this era believed that the faithful could be granted immortality, this author believes that souls exist before they come into this world (8:17-20). Solomon counts himself fortunate to have been given an “undefiled body” (8:20, NRSV) that helps incline him to seek Wisdom. But like some Greek thought of the era, he sees bodies as a detriment to doing God’s will and seeking Wisdom (9:15).

Overall, this book combines Hellenistic and Hebrew thought more thoroughly than other biblical books. It interprets the faith in a way that is intended to help its readers interpret their immediate experience and remain faithful to their ancestral faith. It assures them that the blessings Wisdom offers far exceed the difficulties of the present. Its concluding reminder that God is always with God’s people declares that God will act in response to their faithfulness and to the evil done to them.