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Wisdom in the Book of Wisdom as a Typical Hebrew Door to Jesus Christ

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Abstract

Examining the figure of Wisdom, as presented in the Book of Wisdom, particularly chapters 6-9, the Author highlights first of all the close links with Jewish theology and thought of the First Testament. This factor is not taken for granted, as this book of the Bible was originally written in Greek language in the background of the metropolitan city of Alexandria of Egypt in the first century C.E. After highlighting these ties, he turns his attention to the links with the person of Christ, as depicted in the New Testament.

Keywords

Wisdom, Book of Wisdom, connections between Wisdom and Jesus.

The Book of Wisdom, a Deuterocanonical book of the First Testament, is dated, although not by all scholars, between the end of the first century BC and the beginning of the 1st century CE and the author is identified with a Jew who lived in Alexandria of Egypt, in a Hellenistic context within a Jewish community of the Diaspora.

The author of the book of Wisdom shows a broad knowledge of Koinè's Greek and at the same time also of the Hellenistic culture in which he was

educated. This fact has led some scholars to assume a Hellenistic influence in the exposition of the contents and concepts present in the book (such as Reese¹, for example). Other scholars recognize in this knowledge of the Hellenistic language and culture the formation of the author of the book, who in his mastery was able to express his Jewish faith using the culture and language in which he grew up (such as Kepper, Larcher, Scarpat, Mazzinghi², for example).

I too believe that the author was able to re-propose his Jewish faith using the Greek language of the Hellenistic period and translating it for his contemporary citizens of Alexandria.

The contribution that I now present is a quick analysis on a couple of passages in which the figure of Wisdom is presented in c. 6-9 of the Book of Wisdom, highlighting the background to the First Testament even if expressed in a Hellenistic language.

I. Wis 6,12-20

The first text we will see is Wisdom 6,12-20, a passage in which the author speaks of Wisdom that allows herself to be found by those who seek her³:

Resplendent and unfading is Wisdom,
and she is readily perceived by those who love her,
and found by those who seek her.
She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her;
one who watches for her at dawn will not be disappointed,
for she will be found sitting at the gate.

¹ J.M. REESE, *Hellenistic Influence on the Book of Wisdom and its Consequences*, coll. *Analecta Biblica* 41, Roma, 1970.

² M. KEPPEL, *Hellenistische Bildung im Buch der Weisheit: Studien zur Sprachgestalt und Theologie der Sapientia Salomonis*, coll. *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 280, Berlin - New York, 1999; C. LARCHER, *Le livre de la Sagesse ou la Sagesse de Salomon*, I-III, coll. *Études Bibliques. Nouvelle Série* 1.3.5, Paris, 1983-1985; G. SCARPAT, *Libro della Sapienza*, coll. *Biblica. Testi e Studi*, 1.3.6, I-III, Brescia, 1989-1999; L. MAZZINGHI, *Libro della Sapienza. Introduzione - Traduzione - Commento*, Roma, 2020.

³ Translations in English are taken from the *New American Bible, revised Edition*, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, 2011.

For setting your heart on her is the perfection of prudence,
and whoever keeps vigil for her is quickly free from care;
Because she makes her rounds, seeking those worthy of her,
and graciously appears to them on the way, and goes to meet them
with full attention.

For the true first step toward Wisdom is the desire for instruction;
then, care for instruction is love of her; love means the keeping of her
laws;

To observe her laws is the basis for incorruptibility;
and incorruptibility makes one close to God;
thus the desire for Wisdom leads to a kingdom.

The first statement on Wisdom describes her splendour and her non-fading, with two Greek terms λαμπρά and ἀμάραντός, hapax in the Greek version of the LXX the second, also little used the first (7 times in total, of which 2 in Sap), and describe the desirability (λαμπρά) of Wisdom as the light that illuminates the path of man in the footsteps of God and her inalterability (ἀμάραντός). These concepts are taken up again in Wis 7,10 where Wisdom is chosen in the place of light, because her splendour does not fail, and in 7,29-30 where it is considered superior to light, because night takes the place of light, but Wisdom is not overcome by wickedness.

After the affirmation of these characteristics of Wisdom, she is presented in relation to those who seek her as ready to be recognized by those who love her and to be found by those who seek her.

This sequence of verbs “find, seek and see” is found in two biblical passages: Pro 8,17 where it is said that Wisdom loves those who love her and is found by those who seek her and in Sol 3,1-5 in which the beloved seeks her beloved one, and this search has a positive outcome that leads to find the one she loves. Some differences must be evidenced in these two passages confronted with the book of Wisdom: in Pro Wisdom responds with her love to the love of those who seek her, in the Book of Wisdom it responds by making herself recognized: the verb θεωρέω used in the Book of Wisdom has the value of seeing also with the mind’s eye to recognize the reality which one is seeing, a seeing that leads to knowledge; in Sol the search is frantic and seems long, in Wis the search immediately finds the object of looking for her.

An underlining on the use of θεωρέω instead of ὁράω: when the author of Wis uses ὁράω always means seeing as a spectator or physical seeing with the eyes of the body (cf. 16,6; 19,7-8) and this seeing does not lead to knowledge (cf. 4,14.17 where we can read “they see and do not understand” and 4,18 where it is said that they see and despise, therefore also here they do not understand the reality of things); when he uses θεωρέω he means a knowledge of reality that passes through physical seeing and does not stop at only physical seeing (cf. 13,5; 17,6 and our recurrence). With the choice of this verb, our author wanted to underline the real possibility of recognizing it for those who make it the object of their love.

The v. 13 adds, after the previous emphasis on the easiness with which Wisdom can be found, that she even prevents action by making itself recognized by those who desire her.

This thought on Wisdom which is found by those who seek her, as we have seen, has its roots in the biblical thought.

The passage in vv. 14-16 continues the theme of the easiness of finding Wisdom from the human point of view: there is no need to make an effort to find her, because even if one gets up early in the morning to go in search of her, he will find her at its doors and if one watches to wait for her, he will have no worries, since reflecting on her is a sure guide for our life. The v. 16 takes up and concludes the previous thought by underlining that Wisdom is the subject that makes the first move towards those who are worthy of her, an expression that brings together the previous categories of people: those who love her, seek her, reflect on her, get up soon for her and watch for her. This fact tells us why the search for Wisdom is easy: she is the first to start moving and she does not hide herself from men who desire her.

This passage concludes with a sorite, a rhetorical figure in which the statements are linked to one another in taking as subject the predicate of the previous statement and the final statement takes up the first and last concept expressed⁴. It must be said that our author in using this figure of speech is not rigid and connects the statements using synonyms.

⁴ Cf. VÍLchez LÍNDEZ, *Sapienza* (Commenti biblici), Roma, 1990, p. 267; L. MAZZINGHI, *Libro della Sapienza...*, p. 271f.

The first statement says “the true first step toward Wisdom is the desire for instruction”, in which for grammatical reasons the adjective true is to be connected to first step/beginning and not to instruction⁵, it recalls with a variant the biblical sentence “The first step of the Wisdom is the fear of the Lord” (Ps 110,10; Pr 9,10). In my opinion, our author has chosen to change the fear of the Lord with a desire for education to avoid the negative understanding of the “fear of the Lord” present in the stoic movements of his time in the Hellenistic culture, while in the biblical environment this fear of the Lord has a positive value and is associated with the teaching that seeks and offers norms for a right life, linked to the belief that good brings happiness and well-being and evil misfortune.^[P]In the sorite of Wis 6,17-20 we can see an increase in the affirmations. The desire for education is set as the beginning, which indicates a primary need to be satisfied, which is precisely education, understood in the parallel form as an occupation and no longer just a desire φροντις δὲ παιδείας “care for education”. This care for education is identified as love, which is the spontaneous feeling that pushes to give oneself to the loved one or, in the case of things, to the possession of the object that arouses the desire or to the fulfilment of the

⁵ The superlative adjective with article ἡ ἀληθεστάτη was referred by the authors either to ἀρχή or to ἐπιθυμία, cfr. C. LARCHER, *Le livre de la Sagesse...*, II, p. 427. Now, examining vv. 17-20 it can be noted that all the nouns are indeterminate and are not accompanied by any adjective, except for the presence of ἡ ἀληθεστάτη of v. 17. To which term should this adjective be connected? While it is possible to find an indeterminate noun followed by an attribute determined by the article, cf. J.H. MOULTON, N. TURNER, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Edinburgh 1963, vol III, p. 218; F. BLASS, A. DEBRUNNER, F. REHKOPF, *Grammatica del greco del Nuovo Testamento*, coll. Supplementi al GLNT 3, Brescia 1982, § 270.2, I have not found indications on the possibility of finding an attribute determined by the article that precedes an indeterminate noun. There is the possibility of reading ἡ ἀληθεστάτη παιδείας ἐπιθυμία as a single syntagm, but it could hardly be understood as a noun of the predicate with an indeterminate subject, and if read as the subject of the nominal clause it would disturb the construction of vv. 17-20. Within the passage both the nouns ἀρχή and ἐπιθυμία are without article, as for all the other nouns of the rhetorical figure, and I believe that the specification of the author, signified by the attribute with the article, is to be connected to ἀρχή. In addition to the already mentioned Larcher supporting this translation, see also G. SCARPAT, *Libro della Sapienza*, I, p. 368, while Adalberto SISTI, *Il libro della Sapienza*, Assisi, 1992, p. 196, refers the adjective to the noun ἐπιθυμία.

action. in which you feel pleasure⁶. This love is characterized as keeping the laws of Wisdom. This correlation from loving to keeping the laws has solid biblical foundations, as can be seen in Deut 1,11: “you will love the Lord your God and keep his commandments”. In the following statement, as previously the author had passed from ἐπιθυμία to φροντις, instead of τήρησις “keep/guard” now uses προσοχη “attention / solicitude”, indicating a switch from receiving something to be guarded with a passive sense, to an active custody that includes the whole of actions implemented following these laws. The two terms indicate the passive moment (guarding) and the active one (solicitude) of this love for the laws. This attention to the laws is defined as a guarantee of incorruptibility ἀφθαρσίας. This term is used in LXX only in Wis (3x) and Mac (2x), and the other occurrence in Wis 2,23, outside our passage, where we read, “God created man for incorruptibility and made an image of his own nature”, illuminates the affirmation of the sorite: the incorruptibility ἀφθαρσίας manifests in man his being made in the image of God, an element linked to man’s love for Wisdom which is manifested in the careful observance of his laws. As a background we can see the account of creation, in particular Gen 1,26, with the substitution of dominion over all creation, a consequence for Genesis of being the image and likeness of God, with incorruptibility, which is nothing other than participating to the nature of God.

In the following statement, incorruptibility is identified with an acquired state: it makes one stay close to God. This state is a privilege that signals a particular relationship with God, as people who participate in his power under his protection.

The concluding sentence of the sorite takes up the subject and predicate of the first statement, σοφία “Wisdom” and ἐπιθυμία “desire”, and the concept of the last statement in the term βασιλεία “kingdom” which in this context is the kingdom of God, recalled in the term ἀφθαρσίας “incorruptibility” and ἐγγυς ... θεοῦ, “Close to God”.

⁶ Cf. G. QUELL, E. STAUFFER, “ἀγάπω, ἀγάπη, ἀγαπητός”, in: F. MONTAGNINI, G. SCARPAT, O. SOFFRITTI (eds.), *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, voll. I-XV, Brescia, 1965-1988 (from now on quoted as *GLNT*), here vol. I, p. 60.

II. Wisdom in the prayer of chapter 9

The prayer opens in vv. 1-2 with the parallelism “with your word you created the universe, and you prepared man with your Wisdom”, a parallelism that in my opinion underlines the particularity of the human being creation, as suggested by the biblical account. When man was created, God endowed him with a particular gift, Wisdom, which is vital for him in fulfilling his mission, as indicated in the following verses: dominate, exercise dominion, make righteous judgments.

A particular status is recognized to Wisdom: she sits at the throne of God. She therefore has a particular and familiar relationship with God himself, and this relationship allows her to make those, who bond with her, children of God.

In Wis 9,6 it is stated that the perfect man among men, even endowed with all knowledge, but lacking in Wisdom, is considered worthless, taking up a concept expressed in Ps 1,3-4: the right man who walks in the ways of the Lord, taught by Wisdom, is as stable as a tree planted along streams of water, while the wicked one, who does not base his action on the ways of God taught by Wisdom, is like chaff that the wind scatters, which is considered worthless.

The author of the book, impersonating the figure of King Solomon, recognizes in Wis 9,9-11 the importance of Wisdom for the role of government. He starts with verse 9 affirming some characteristics of Wisdom: she knows the works of God, she was present at the creation of the world, she knows what is pleasing and right for God. These characteristics manifest that familiarity of Wisdom with God suggested by his sitting at his throne, of the beginning of the prayer.

At v. 10, having recognized her particularities, he asks God to send her to him, so that she can be his counsellor and guide him on paths pleasing to him. At v. 11, recalling v. 9, recognizes that under her guidance his actions will conform to God’s will. To guide⁷ and, in

⁷ In 37 out of 43 occurrences of the verb ὀδηγέω in the OT the subject is God: Ex 13,17; 15,13; 32,34; Num 24,8; Deut 1,33; Jos 24,3; 2Sa 7,23; 1Ch 17,21; Neh 9,12.19; Ps 5,9; 22,3; 24,5.9; 26,11; 30,4; 42,3; 59,11; 60,4; 66,5; 72,24; 76,21; 77,14.53.72; 79,2; 85,11; 89,16; 105,9; 106,7.30; 107,11; 118,35; 138,10.24; 142,10 e Isa 63,14. In the three occurrences of Wis 9,11 and 10,10.17 the subject is always Wisdom. In the

particular, to guard⁸, referring to Wisdom in favour of the praying person in v. 11, are actions that often in biblical texts have God as their subject and the people of God as their object. Here it is Wisdom that acts for man in the place of God.

In the last part of the prayer, in vv. 17-18, it is again reaffirmed that Wisdom knows the will of God, and thanks to her action men have straightened their paths, have been instructed on what pleases God and have been saved. Here, too, Wisdom is clothed with an activity that in the biblical text refers directly to God⁹.

In the prayer, Wisdom is the necessary gift to ask from God in order to live up to the task received, due to her particular relationship with God, whose qualities she shares so much that she can be interchangeable with him when she comes to interacting with the man.

Wisdom also lives together with God, whose activity of governing the world she shares, and was given to man, when he was created by God, to assist him in dominating creatures and the world according to God's will. She is therefore indispensable for Solomon, chosen by God as king of his people and charged with building a temple for him.

Finally, Wisdom is indispensable to man so that he can know God's will and plans and she is actively at work in guiding men to salvation.

III. Looking forward to the New Testament

These presented are some of the characteristics with which Wisdom is described in the book of Wisdom. Some of them recall some characteristics with which Jesus is pictured in the New Testament.

We have underlined that Wisdom and God are interchangeable in their action, the salvation is attributed to God and in the book of Wisdom

other three occurrences out of Wis, the subject is the king, future bride, in Ps 44,5; the Kohelet's heart in Ecc 2,3 and Job in Job 31,18.

⁸ Cf. G. BERTRAM, "φυλάσσω, φυλακῆ", in: *GLNT*, XV, pp. 176-178.

⁹ The salvation is generally attributed to God in the OT, here the subject who saves is Wisdom, and this idea goes on with the precedent idea: God and Wisdom, for their relationship, are interchangeable. For God as subject who saves, see W. FOERSTER, "σώζω, σωτηρία", in: *GLNT*, XIII, pp. 446-552, especially pp. 473-480.

to Wisdom herself. What Wisdom does is what God himself does. This idea, for me, is the same idea expressed in the Gospel of John, when Jesus speaks about his relation with God, his father: “The Father and I are one” (Jn 10, 30); “If I do not perform my Father’s works, do not believe me; but if I perform them, even if you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may realize [and understand] that the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (Jn 10,37-38); as an example, but we can find more, reading the Gospel of John.

The description of Wisdom as the one who can guide a person on God’s paths, can teach him what God likes and what pleases God and can guide men to salvation, represents the same idea we can find in John 14,6: “Jesus said to him, «I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me»”. In the book of Wisdom, Wisdom is the one through whom one can reach God, and under whose guide one can walk righteously in God’s ways, quality that John applies to Jesus in his Gospel: calling him “way ... truth ... life” John makes it explicit that only Jesus is the way to the Father “No one comes to the Father except through me”.

In the prayer of Wis 9, we have seen that when God created the human being, he endowed him with a special gift: Wisdom. This represents the particularity of human being in the creation, his uniqueness, and his exclusive relationship with God through Wisdom. This idea, widened to all creation, is the same which we find in John 1, 3: “All things came to be through him (him is Word/Logos that is Jesus), and without him nothing came to be”, and in Col 1, 16-17: “... in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, ... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together”. In the book of Wisdom, Wisdom plays a special role in the creation, being beside God and being the special gift for human being, this special role is attributed to Jesus in the reflexions of the New Testament, as evidenced by the texts quoted above.

There’s one more idea that connects Wisdom with Jesus. We have seen that Wisdom prevents those who seek her by making herself found as easily as possible, almost anticipating their search (cf. Wis 6, 12f). This

attitude to prevent the search or make it easy we can find in the episode of Zacchaeus (Lk 19,1-10), where Jesus called Zacchaeus, who, looking for him, climbed a sycamore tree, and asked him to be his guest in his house. Jesus here is like Wisdom, who is waiting outside the door for those who seek her.

Wisdom as depicted in the book of Wisdom, anticipates the attitude of Jesus, and personifies the unique relationship he has with God, his father.