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Larry Wills

Brown University, larry_wills@brown.edu

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Why the Passive Protagonist in Wisdom of Solomon 2–5?

Lawrence M. Wills

Brown University

In 2018 the Wisdom and Apocalypticism group of Society of Biblical Literature convened a session to investigate certain problems identified in Wisdom of Solomon. The panel agreed on one thing, that the unintegrated mixture of Jewish wisdom, apocalypticism, and Middle Platonist philosophy in Wisdom of Solomon constituted a sort of “swamp.”¹ These three different discourses were not fully alloyed. I would argue, however, that there is also a *psychological* swamp in Wisdom of Solomon. All scholars agree that there are three separable sections in Wisdom of Solomon (usually divided 1:1–6:21, 6:22–11:1, 11:2–19:22), but the protagonist of part one is more passive, even disaffected, than the voice or voices in parts two and three. How does this come about? After a few verses on the importance of our words in chap. 1—a traditional wisdom motif—a revolutionary new direction is introduced: “Do not invite death by the error of your life. . . . God did not make death. . . . for righteousness is immortal” (1:12–15). This stunning philosophical, even Platonic, initiative is not simply argued as Plato would, even with irony. Wisdom of Solomon, rather, takes the unusual step of addressing this problem *through the speech of the ungodly*: “But the ungodly (*asebeis*) by their words and deeds summoned death. . . . They reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves, ‘Short and sorrowful is life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to an end’” (1:16, 2:1). This introduces the intense reflection of the sub-section chaps. 2–5, the implied dialogue between the ungodly and the righteous, and the lesson on immortality, although the two parties never really speak to each other. A competition of worldviews is explored that may be more than simply a philosophical disagreement; the passive protagonist may reflect a circle who look for a reversal of worldly honor and shame in a post-death immortality for the righteous. And given the special pleading in this section for the reward for the eunuch, one wonders whether the author of this section may have been a eunuch-scribe.

¹ It might be argued that Wisdom of Solomon is not as much a philosophical/apocalyptic swamp as it first appears. The mixture might have seemed quite appropriate to the author and audience. Further, John J. Collins, “The Reinterpretation of Apocalyptic Traditions in the Wisdom of Solomon,” in *The Book of Wisdom in Modern Research: Studies on Tradition, Redaction, and Theology*, ed. Angelo Passaro and Giuseppe Bellia (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2005), 143–57, here at 147, 155, argues that the apocalypticism in our text is really subordinated to a philosophical worldview. This is somewhat analogous, and indeed related, to the thesis of Emma Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War: Divine Politics and Polemics in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), that apocalyptic motifs in Paul may not be as central to that author as are Stoicism and Platonism.

Setting the Stage: the Voice of the Ungodly

In chaps. 2–5 the narrator, presumably Solomon, reports the words of the ungodly, who in turn describe for us what the righteous person is like. The ungodly, then, are quite active in that they speak—and this is important—and have an active agenda in summoning death and making a covenant with it, living the life of the powerful, and crushing the righteous:

Let us make use of creation to the full as in youth. . . .
 Let our might be the law of right,
 for what is weak proves itself to be useless. (2:6, 11)²

This is to be contrasted with the righteous person (*dikaios*), who does not speak, and whose role *is only reported by the ungodly*. The very vocal wicked propose using their power to destroy the righteous person, but there is no protest by the righteous, or indeed any sign of resistance whatsoever. The ungodly again speak:

Let us oppress the righteous poor man,
 let us not spare the widow
 or regard the gray hairs of the aged. . . .
 Let us test the righteous with insult and torture,
 so that we may find out how gentle he is,
 and make trial of his forbearance.³ (2:10, 19)

καταδυναστεύσωμεν πένητα δίκαιον,
 μὴ φεισώμεθα χήρας
 μηδὲ πρεσβύτου ἐντραπῶμεν πολιὰς πολυχρονίους. . . .
 ὕβρει καὶ βασάνῳ ἐτάσωμεν αὐτον,
 ἵνα γνῶμεν τὴν ἐπιείκειαν αὐτοῦ
 καὶ δοκιμάσωμεν τὴν ἀνεξικακίαν αὐτοῦ.

But the narrator—presumably Solomon—steps in and speaks for the righteous, assuring us that the ungodly will ultimately fail:

Those who despise wisdom and instruction are miserable.

² The translation of biblical passages is from the NRSV.

³ *Anexikakia* is first attested here, and is not a common word; cf. *makrothymia* below. It appears also in philosophical or psychological contexts: Plutarch, *Moralia* 90e; Lucian *De parasito* 53; Heliodorus 10.12; Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 10; 2 Tim 2:24.

Their hope is vain, their labors are unprofitable, and their works are useless.
(3:11)

But which works are meant here—their campaigns, their grasping of power, their persecution of the weak righteous? No, these are not mentioned after 2:10–11. Rather, the discussion shifts entirely to wives and children:

The wives [of the ungodly] are foolish, and their children evil;
their offspring are accursed. (3:12–13)

In this highly dualized conflict between the ungodly and the righteous, the wicked will be punished with . . . foolish wives and evil children? Is this a reality TV show, *The Wives of Alexandria*?

We recall here that in traditional Israelite wisdom, God rewards the wise person with 1) wealth, 2) a long healthy life, and 3) many children. Jon Levenson has rightly argued that in Israel children, a lineage for family honor, and memorializing at gravesites functioned as an equivalent of immortality.⁴ But here the wicked can only expect bad children, and therefore no memorializing and perpetual honor:

Even if they live long they will be held of no account,
and finally their old age will be without honor. (3:17)

Our text then posits an alternative reward to the three classic rewards of wisdom:

Blessed is the barren woman who is undefiled,
for she will have fruit when God examines souls.
Blessed also is the eunuch whose hands have done no lawless deed . . .
for special favor will be shown him for his faithfulness. (3:13–14)

The childless woman and the eunuch lack children, the functional equivalent of immortality in this life, but are compensated with post-life honor and immortality.⁵

⁴ Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 108–22.

⁵ See the discussion in Shannon Burkes, *God, Self, and Death: The Shape of Religious Transformation in the Second Temple Period*, *JSS* Supplements 79 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 165–68, 186–89.

In much of Israelite, Jewish, and early Christian literature, justice is depicted as reversal, the righteous vindicated and the wicked punished.⁶ Here the wicked are depicted as active in this life, and the righteous very passive, but God will be active in reversing this *after* this life:

The Lord will laugh them to scorn,
and the wicked will become dishonored corpses. . . .
God will dash them speechless to the ground,
and shake them from the foundations. (4:18)

There is a comeuppance and shaming of the wicked, over and over, in line after line. This is especially noted with regard to the pointlessness of their children:

The branches will be broken off before they come to maturity,
and their fruit will be useless,
not ripe enough to eat, and good for nothing. (4:5)

In addition, we note that the very vocal and *plural* wicked propose using their power to destroy the *individual* righteous person. The pattern here—plural wicked and singular righteous—is also found often in Proverbs 10.⁷ Proverbs 10:25 at first seems similar to Wisdom:

When the tempest passes, the wicked are no more,
but the righteous are established forever.

Yet Proverbs expresses the *conservative* wisdom background to which our passage is a radical response. For Proverbs, the wicked fall and the righteous succeed—in this life. In Wisdom of Solomon, the wicked *do rule* in this life, the righteous are only established *in immortality*.

A New Center of Gravity in this Text?

We pause, then to compare the number of half-lines in Wisdom 2–5 devoted to different kinds of discourse, in an admittedly imprecise statistical approach (some half-lines may be counted in more than one category):

⁶ God's role in maintaining justice through reversal was universally recognized, and can be seen in *b. Erub.* 13b (Jewish), Luke 6:20–25 (Christian), and Aesop in Diogenes Laertius, *Lines Chilo* 2 (Greek). An excellent treatment of Aristotle's thoughts on reversal in tragedy is found in Jeff Jay, *The Tragic in Mark: A Literary-Historical Interpretation*; Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 79–83.

⁷ I thank Karina Martin Hogan for pointing out this interesting similarity in Proverbs 10.

<u>Kind of statement</u>	<u>number of half-lines</u>
--The ungodly or foolish (<i>asebeis, aphrones</i>) speak:	55
--The ungodly reflect: life is short; no post-death reward	17
--The ungodly are active in the world in a general way	8
--The ungodly active in specific way, oppressing others	14
--The ungodly present the beliefs of the <i>dikaios</i>	14
--The narrator speaks, praising the righteous and condemning the foolish in general terms	120
--More specifically, the foolish are punished in their “works”	6
--More specifically still, they have bad wives and children	20
--Blessed is the barren woman	3
--Blessed is the eunuch	4
--Childlessness with virtue will be honored	8
--There will be a reward for virtue	2
--There will be compensation for lack of old age (as with Enoch)	14

Can the statistical center of 2–5 be ascertained? To be sure, the narrator’s praise of righteousness and condemnation of foolishness in general terms is the largest section by far, a hundred twenty half-lines. But other emphases are notable: the ungodly speak fifty-five half-lines, which is a very large number considering that the righteous one never speaks. The ungodly present a full and complex rationale for their position, the righteous are reported to have a simpler position, but one of integrity. Only six half-lines are used to express that the foolish, in a general way, are to be punished in the vanity of their works, but on a specific level, *twenty half-lines are taken up to state that the foolish have bad wives and children*. The contrasting motifs of the bad wives and children of the foolish on one hand, and the reward for the childless woman and eunuch on the other, *take up thirty-five half-lines*. One of the strongest themes of Wisdom 2–5, then, is the problematizing of children. It seems unlikely that the cause of anxiety in this section is gentile persecution of Jews in Alexandria, as is sometimes assumed.⁸

⁸ I grant that Wis 2:15 can be construed as the Jewish awareness of difference: “The very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange.” This awareness of difference is found in Alexandrian Judaism in Haman’s edict in Greek Esther and in 3 Maccabees. The singular righteous could then be understood as the righteous Jew, the many wicked the gentile civic leaders. But why then the childless woman and the eunuch?

What, then, is the cause of anxiety? Even though the modern reader may think of the righteous protagonist as the “I” who speaks, this figure never speaks. Who speaks in narrative is as important as who acts, or who writes. In the Jewish novellas, for instance, agency is communicated by noting who speaks, who commands, and who writes. In Esther, first Mordecai speaks and Esther does not, but this is reversed from chap. 4 on, when Esther speaks and Mordecai does not. At the end Esther even writes decrees.⁹ In addition, in the Book of Judith her hyper-agency is communicated by the fact that she speaks far more than anyone else, and by her speech she controls others. The silent protagonist in Wisdom 2–5, however, suggests a passive nature, a lack of agency. The idea of the divine passive may come to mind—a passive verb that assumes God’s active movement behind the scenes, but Wisdom 2–5 is more concerned about the *psychologically* passive protagonist, while the divine passive in, say, Wisdom 7:1, actually suggests a stronger protagonist.

We should pause, however, to note some parallels to other texts. The attack on the righteous person is similar to the Psalms of individual lament, such as Psalms 22, 34, 69, 109, and 118, although these actually feature an *active* and *loud* voice in complaining, even protesting, along the lines of Job. Still, they are emphasized in the gospel passion narratives, where it could be argued, at least in the case of Mark (see below), that Jesus is sometimes passive. Silent suffering evokes the suffering servant in Isaiah, analyzed well by George W. E. Nickelsburg.¹⁰ Representing the speech of opponents is typical of diatribe, and in addition, Greek philosophy emphasized *enkrateia*, self-mastery, and also the noble death.¹¹ David Winston also points out the parallel to Plato’s *Symposium* 208e, where the bearing of metaphorical children through philosophy is preferable to the bearing of real children.¹² But these observations do not fully explain the fact that the righteous person here is so thoroughly silent and passive, such a non-agent in this world. And despite the fact that the *dikaios* Socrates was actually executed, the

Why the focus on *children*? The entire passage makes more sense as those marginalized *within* the community of Jews. John Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 194–95, also perceives here a social or philosophical difference, not persecution by gentiles.

⁹ Rachel Adelman, *The Female Ruse: Women’s Deception and Divine Sanction in the Hebrew Bible*, Hebrew Bible Monographs (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2017), 198–230; Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), and on *Judith*, idem, *Judith* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), passim.

¹⁰ Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity*, Expanded Edition; HTS 56 (Cambridge: Harvard Divinity School, 2007). Note that he compares the structure of Wisdom 2–5 with these texts.

¹¹ David Seeley, *The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul’s Concept of Salvation* (JSNT Supplements; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

¹² Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 133.

dualistic contrast between bearing real children and “bearing” immortality is actually more intense in Wisdom of Solomon.

The Ascetic Goal in Wisdom 2–5

We should examine more closely the actual progression of the conflict in our section. When the foolish describe the righteous, it at first seems that the foolish are recounting the *active* opposition by the *dikaios*, but the language soon drifts toward the righteous simply maintaining separation. I quote a number of lines here, to indicate how the image of opposition changes from conflictual to a sort of sectarian purity:

Let us lie in wait for the righteous man,
because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions;
He reproaches us for sins against the law,
and accuses us of sins against our training.
He professes to have knowledge of God,
and calls himself a child of the Lord.
He became to us a reproof of our thoughts;
the very sight of 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 something base,
and he avoids our ways as unclean.
He calls the last end of the righteous happy,
and boasts that God is his father. (2:12–16)

ἐνεδρεύσωμεν τὸν δίκαιον,
ὅτι δύσχρηστος ἡμῖν ἐστὶν καὶ ἐναντιοῦται τοῖς ἔργοις ἡμῶν
καὶ ὀνειδίζει ἡμῖν ἁμαρτήματα νόμου
καὶ ἐπιφημίζει ἡμῖν ἁμαρτήματα παιδείας ἡμῶν·
ἐπαγγέλλεται γινῶσιν ἔχειν θεοῦ
καὶ παῖδα κυρίου ἑαυτὸν ὀνομάζει·
ἐγένετο ἡμῖν εἰς ἔλεγχον ἐννοιῶν ἡμῶν,
βαρὺς ἐστὶν ἡμῖν καὶ βλεπόμενος,
ὅτι ἀνόμιος τοῖς ἄλλοις ὁ βίος αὐτοῦ,
καὶ ἐξηλλαγμένοι αἱ τρίβοι αὐτοῦ·
εἰς κίβδηλον ἐλογίσθημεν αὐτῷ,
καὶ ἀπέχεται τῶν ὁδῶν ἡμῶν ὡς ἀπὸ ἀκαθαρσιῶν·
μακαρίζει ἔσχατα δικαίων καὶ ἀλαζονεύεται πατέρα θεόν.

We may place this depiction of a passive hero on a spectrum with other passive agents—although “passive agent” may seem an oxymoron. An even more extreme case is found in the *Testament of Joseph*. It may or may not be Jewish, and may or may not be from this same period, yet it is relevant here. Unlike the rest of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *Testament of Joseph* has a narrative component—actually, two narrative components. Joseph speaks in the first person and recounts, first, how he resisted the advances of Potiphar’s wife, and second, how his brothers treated him shamefully and sold him to foreign traders as a slave. These two incidents are in the reverse order of that found in Genesis, and are very different from each other in tone. It has often been suggested that they derive from separate authors.¹³ They treat different virtues, and paint a different picture of Joseph’s character. In the first half, Joseph is strong, active, and pious, and in the second, he is weak, woebegone, and passive. The second section introduces scenes that are not mentioned in Genesis.

The second half of *Testament of Joseph*, then, communicates a claustrophobic tone, exhibiting a psychological interest often associated with novelistic literature. A number of scholars have compared it to a novel.¹⁴ Joseph narrates repeatedly that his love for his brothers was so great that he was determined to suffer silently and not divulge that they had kidnapped him, abused him, and sold him to the Ishmaelites as a slave, though he was actually a free man and son of a great man. Everyone recognizes that Joseph is not a slave, but he denies this ever more fervently. When he is beaten, he continues to maintain that he is a slave to protect the reputation of his brothers. This illustrates the value of sacrificing for one’s brothers, but it takes an odd turn. Joseph continues to lie for no reason to protect the dishonest Egyptian eunuch who has purchased him. There is an irony to this section: as the figures controlling Joseph are *increasingly* corrupt and unworthy of his protection, he lies *more fervently*, insisting time after time that he is a slave (see 11:1–2, 13:4, 16:6). Robert Kugler provides a sort of philosophical defense for Joseph’s silence,¹⁵ but Joseph here seems far from the enkratic philosopher. To modern eyes, Joseph’s silence seems to present a pathological passivity. Joseph is “pathetic,” and this in a technical sense, *pathētos*. Acting in this way borders on the irrational, and seems based on a false elaboration of *makrothymia* (long-suffering). It would likely be treated negatively by an elite Greek or Roman philosopher as being driven by *pathē*.¹⁶

But two questions arise. First, can this section of *Testament of Joseph* be dated to our period? Probably so. Philo introduces a digression in his *On Joseph* that is similar to this

13 Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 163–70.

14 Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 163–70.

15 Robert A. Kugler, *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 81.

16 On *pathē*, see Julia Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 103–20, esp. 113.

separable second part of *Testament of Joseph*.¹⁷ This indicates that this section of *Testament of Joseph* circulated separately from the other, and that it could be as early as Philo. Philo includes all of the motifs of this passage, but does not move in so radically a passive direction. Joseph is a model of piety, forbearance, forgiveness—more of a Stoic hero. His brothers in fact praise him. As in *Testament of Joseph*, Joseph chooses *not* to disclose his high status or what others did to him, yet he is not as passive as in *Testament of Joseph*. He simply exhibits extraordinary self-mastery. Second, should the *pathētos* protagonist be considered a sort of subversive or even sectarian hero? This may be the case. The rhetoric of asceticism often sublimates sex and power to a higher and delayed gratification. Both *Testament of Joseph* and Wisdom 2–5 may be constructing a colonized Jewish deviance.¹⁸ Through a radical sublimation of one’s claim to public honor, one could hyper-invest in an alternative goal—in the case of *Testament of Joseph*, family and fellow members of Israel; in the case of Wisdom 2–5, a post-death reward for virtue.

We may compare a host of other passive agents in ancient Jewish and Christian texts and place them on a spectrum. Even in Genesis Joseph is often depicted as passive and sometimes “feminized” by ancient standards of masculinity.¹⁹ The suffering servant of Isaiah was noted above as a passive sufferer, and Daniel, though an active trickster in Susanna and Bel, is presented in Daniel 1–6 as a passive role model. T. M. Lemos has suggested that he is feminized by ancient standards.²⁰ Although as noted above, Hebrew Esther creates a more active heroine vis-à-vis Mordecai, Greek Esther reverses this process. While in the Hebrew Bible Esther *discovers* agency and a leadership role, and at the end *writes* edicts while Mordecai goes silent, in Greek Esther Mordecai is re-asserted into the active, leadership role while Esther retreats, bemoaning her sexual impurity to God alone.²¹ Likewise, Eric Thurman argues that

17 Philo, Joseph 41.246–50. Daniel J. Harrington, “Joseph in the Testament of Joseph, Pseudo-Philo, and Philo,” in *Studies on the Testament of Joseph*, ed. George W. E. Nickelsburg (Septuagint and Cognate Studies; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1975), 127–31, here at 128, agrees that the *Testament of Joseph* section is separable and closely related to the separable digression in Philo.

18 Wills, “Ascetic Theology Before Asceticism? Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self,” *JAAR* 74 (2006): 902–25. Alternatively, asceticism often hides sex and power under a mild exterior, as a sort of “lamb who conquers.” Shelly Matthews treats very well the sublimated power of the humble in *Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

19 See Adelman, *Female Ruse*. Cross-culturally, heroes are active, performing deeds and labors and are memorialized as a result. The trickster is also very active. The passive hero, then, is a contrast to the standard type.

20 Lemos, “‘They Have Become Women’: Judean Diaspora and Postcolonial Theories of Gender and Migration,” in *Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: Essays in Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Saul M. Olyan (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 81–109, 105.

21 See Adelman above, and also Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 93–131.

Jesus exhibits a shocking lack of masculinity in the Gethsemane scene of Mark.²² The protagonists in the Greek novels—the men more than the women—are often surprisingly passive.²³ All such notions of the passive or feminized protagonist likely relate to the gradual development of ascetic theology in both Judaism and early Christianity—although the rabbis channeled this impulse to the side.²⁴ The notions are indirectly related as well to developments in late Stoicism, although the Stoics maintained a doctrine of masculinized self-mastery, and would hardly have praised poor Joseph for suffering unjustly in silence.

Another Possibility for the Social Background of Wisdom 2–5

What might be the specific social background for the passive hero in Wisdom 2–5? I have suggested a separatist, sectarian deviance. There is one other possibility, although they are not mutually exclusive. As noted, the problematizing of children does not likely reflect a response to gentile persecution. We must look elsewhere. We recall that in traditional Israelite wisdom God bestows three rewards on the wise: healthy old age, wealth, and children. Yet in Wisdom of Solomon the barren woman and the eunuch lack children. Winston assumed that the inclusion of the eunuch is based upon Isa 56:3–5, and indeed it is likely related.²⁵ But our text also pauses over the eunuch, and more to the point, seems to take on the interior perspective of the shame of the eunuch and the childless woman—the eunuch perhaps a bit more than the childless woman. The author seems to *feel* their pain of not having issue. What is moving about Wisdom of Solomon is that the sense of shame and loss of the barren woman and the eunuch is powerful, believable, experienced by the audience:

22 Thurman, “Novel Men: Masculinity and Empire in Mark’s Gospel and Xenophon’s An Ephesian Tale,” in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 185–229. Matthew’s beatitudes may also be compared; note especially 5:10: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ (*dikaïosunēs*) sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

23 David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 8. Perhaps the closest parallel to the emotionalism of Joseph is the male protagonist of the Greek novels. According to Konstan, “Sighs, tears, and suicide attempts are as characteristic of the male as of the female in distress. . . .” Somewhat like *Testament of Joseph* is also the *Testament of Abraham*, where Abraham exhibits an anomie or listlessness at the time of his death. *Testament of Abraham*, however, is likely a satire, so the listlessness is a put-on, not keenly felt. See Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 245–56.

24 Wills, “Ascetic Theology;” Michael L. Satlow, “‘And on the Earth You Shall Sleep’: *Talmud Torah* and Rabbinic Asceticism,” *JR* 83 (2003): 204–25; Steven Fraade, “Ascetic Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 253–88.

25 Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon*, 132.

Special favor will be shown the eunuch for his faithfulness,
 and a place of great delight in the temple of the Lord.
 For the fruit of good labors is renown,
 and the root of understanding does not fail. . . .
 Better than [the prolific brood of the ungodly] is childlessness with virtue,
 for in the memory of virtue is immortality. (3:14–15, 4:1)

Our author contrasts the childlessness of the childless woman and eunuch on one hand and the prolific brood of the ungodly on the other. It is a long treatment, about a chapter (3:12–4:7), and is further highlighted by being placed at the center of this section. It is quite possible that the author is a eunuch-scribe.²⁶

Positing eunuchs as authors or audience in this period, far from being a stretch, is quite plausible. Eunuchs are everywhere in the texts, discussed often in Ctesias's *Persica*, the *Story of Abikar*, Esther, and Judith. Daniel, his three companions, and Nehemiah were perhaps eunuchs; certainly, later Jews and Christians assumed that Daniel and his three friends were all eunuchs.²⁷ Eunuchs were severely penalized or restricted in Israelite law (Deut 23:1), but Isa 56:3–5 indicates a more inclusive policy—inclusive, however, only because it is in contrast to the *general* exclusion of eunuchs. The eunuch was sometimes tasked with protecting the harem, as in Esther, but a eunuch could also be a courtier—or a traitor—within the court. A eunuch was a symbol of the king's power, but perceived as ambiguous in terms of gender, and in terms of ethnicity as well, that is, a boundary-crosser. Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon present opposite sides of the coin on eunuchs. Since Ben Sira himself was a highly placed scribe, his comments about eunuchs perhaps reflect his contact, even competition with eunuchs as fellow-courtiers. In Ben Sira, the eunuch is a despised third gender: every prejudice against the eunuch is expressed. Ben Sira shames the eunuch by finding humor in his attempts at sex (20:4, 30:20; a similar motif is found in Chariton 5.2–4). In Ben Sira, the eunuch is perhaps a lightning rod for anxiety about gender in general.²⁸ Among the deep differences between Ben Sira and Wisdom 2–5, they may have also reflected a competition between active and passive ideals of the sage.

²⁶ We could consider as well that the author was a childless woman, but the eunuch figures a bit more prominently, and the eunuch-scribe was a common role.

²⁷ See Wills, *Judith*, 333–35, and the literature cited there. I do not assume that a eunuch must be weak or passive. Some of the eunuchs played the role of active and powerful courtiers. But at the same time, most eunuchs were probably both scribal and dependent. Ben Sira certainly confirms the prejudice of eunuchs as weak and passive.

²⁸ See the chapter on Ben Sira in Lawrence M. Wills, *Apocrypha: Jewish Texts in Christian Bibles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

A eunuch-scribe, then, might easily have chafed at the notion of the “blessings” of children, and maintained a secret critique of child-bearing as the prize of worldly wisdom. Given the negative depiction of eunuchs, does this passage in Wisdom give voice to the eunuch’s internalized sense of inferiority? The plaint of the eunuch-scribe in that case reminds one of Maggie the Cat in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Her husband, who is gay, cannot give her the progeny that would solidify her status within the large, wealthy family. Maggie refers to the prolific brood of her nieces and nephews as “no-neck little monsters.” Both Maggie and the eunuch are trapped in a system that will not allow them to claim status or honor.

Conclusion

So I return to the characterization of Wisdom of Solomon as a psychological swamp. Perhaps because my professor, Dieter Georgi, argued for separate origins for the three sections of Wisdom of Solomon, I have always been intrigued by the possibility.²⁹ I grant that most scholars now argue that the three distinctive sections were nevertheless composed by one author, and this may very well be the case. Yet I return to some of the differences:

--The passive personality, associated with the compensation for the eunuch, is expressed in the first section only.³⁰

--God’s role in intervening in this life, emphasized strongly in the third section, is absent from the first section.

--The interlocking structures that scholars posit for our text do not characterize the first section, or perhaps those structures have swallowed up chaps. 2–5 in a larger whole.³¹

--Section one emphasizes individual and also universal values, the last section emphasizes Israel versus the nations. The barren woman and eunuch of the first section do not represent “Israel,” but were indeed marginalized categories *within Israel*. In section one, the competition between righteous and the wicked may very well represent a semi-sectarian, or a secret-sectarian identity. Wisdom 2–5 may also reflect an introversionist opposition to texts like Ben Sira.

--The style of Wisdom of Solomon seems at first uniform throughout, but that is not entirely the case. Ten of the eighteen Hebraisms that Winston notes are in section one, which

²⁹ Georgi, *Weisheit Salomos*, JSRZ 3.4 (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1980), 392–95.

³⁰ I do not assume that a eunuch must be passive, since many were not, but that in this text the eunuch is associated with the passive agent.

³¹ Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon*, 9–12.

is smaller than the other sections.³² Alliteration also occurs mainly in chaps. 2–5, yet almost all of the very striking neologisms occur in the last two sections. *Paideia* occurs almost entirely in section one, and the word wisdom barely appears in section three, by far the longest section. Thus the stylistic modes of Wisdom of Solomon are not displayed equally throughout.

Many scholars address these issues, arguing that there is an expanding worldview in the text, from the individualism of the first section to the saving role of Wisdom in the second to God's role in history in the third. Jason Zurawski, for instance, finds the theme of *paideia* throughout, though this word mainly occurs only in section one.³³ I also grant that the arguments for partition are not strong arguments, but the “psychological swamp” and the passive hero suggests again the possibility that chapters 2–5 are, at the very least, quite different. Perhaps they are meant to begin the story in a low place, or to present a strategy of ascetic deviance, or sublimation of honor to a post-death reward. We recall two lines quoted above, the opposition by the righteous which is not active, open competition, but the maintenance of a boundary of purity—stated here by the impious:

His [the righteous person's] manner of life is unlike that of others,
and his ways are strange.
We are considered by him as something base,
and he avoids our ways as unclean.
He calls the last end of the righteous happy,
and boasts that God is his father. (2:15–16)

It is an inward-turning boundary construction that competes for a higher prize, the honor and immortality that comes not in this world but in the next. One is reminded of Wayne Meeks's classic characterization of the community of the Gospel of John as an “introversionist sect.”³⁴ To be sure, Jesus is not passive in John but commanding, but the inward-looking perspective of the community and lack of external boundary markers are similar. Wisdom 2–5 does not signal external competition and markers but internal integrity, a semi-sectarian consciousness. Ultimately, then, the psychological discrepancy in Wisdom of Solomon is more jarring than

³² Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon*, 14–18.

³³ Zurawski, “Paideia: A Multifarious and Unifying Concept in the Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Karina Martin Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Emma Wasserman (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2017), 195–214, here at 211. I have profited from discussions on this text with Zurawski, Emma Wasserman, Matthew Kraus, and Diana Swancutt, as well as the editors of *The Journal of Religious Competition in Antiquity*.

³⁴ Wayne Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72.

the philosophical or apocalyptic discrepancies, and chaps. 2–5 might be explained as a eunuch-scribe's heroic quest for God's post-death honor.