SAPIENTIAL VALUES AND APOCALYPTIC IMAGERY IN THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

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The very title of the book in the Septuagint, the Wisdom of Solomon (or the Book of Wisdom), would suggest that it belongs to the sapiential tradition, especially through the attribution to Solomonic authorship as in Proverbs, Song of Songs and Qoheleth. However, it is an extremely late work in comparison to the main sapiential texts of the Bible, stemming from the Greco Roman period in Egypt. Numerous scholars have noted particular affinities in the work to traits of apocalyptic literature.1 There is a reference to the “mysteries of God” in Wis 2:22. We witness a brief, cosmic judgment of God in Wis 5:15-23 where all lawlessness is to be swept away through a cataclysmic storm. Solomon prays to God in order to receive the special wisdom which sits by the throne of God (Wis 9:10). The presentation of the exodus events throughout the entire final section of the book (Wis 11-19) is conveyed as a cosmic judgment that has already taken place in Israel’s deliverance from Egypt and sustenance in the desert.

Apocalyptic works had become increasingly more prevalent primarily in Judea but also in the diaspora of Greece and Egypt from the

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first century BCE until the first century CE. With their stress on divine revelation through visions and divine judgment throughout the cosmos, apocalyptic texts were particularly suited to situations of crisis and political unrest in Jewish communities. It would be surprising for the author of the Wisdom of Solomon not to employ certain apocalyptic elements in an exhortation to the Jewish community in Alexandria during times of crisis and political upheaval. The work sustains a continuous argument for justice and wisdom in the midst of tension and challenges. What is more surprising is the manner in which the author clings to the values of the sapiential tradition (the inherent beauty and order of creation, the openness of wisdom for all, the primacy of argument to exhort and to convince are among the most important) even as the argument for justice becomes more acute in the final section of the book.

**LITERARY GENRES AND WORLDVIEWS**

Scholars have not come to a consensus regarding the genre of wisdom literature and its relationship to apocalyptic writing. Both forms of literature owe a great deal of inspiration to prophetic writings. At times we tend to speak of these forms of writing as complete distinct entities in terms of their literary genres, worldview and values. Yet clearly there is considerable overlap between these forms of writing. George Nickelsburg has recently challenged the presumed distinctiveness between wisdom and apocalyptic texts:

…the entities usually defined as sapiential and apocalyptic often cannot be cleanly separated from one another because both are the products of wisdom circles that are becoming increasingly diverse in the Greco-Roman period. Thus, apocalyptic texts contain elements that are at home in wisdom literature, and wisdom texts reflect growing interest in eschatology.

However, the persistence of a particular worldview associated with these sapiential writings remains, no matter how difficult it may be to articulate their distinctiveness. Note how James Crenshaw describes the diversity yet complementarity of the main sapiential texts in the Bible: Proverbs, Qoheleth, Job, Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. “However

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3 See in particular M. Kolarcik, “Universalism and Justice in the Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Treasures of Wisdom*, 289-301.