NOMOS AND NOMOI IN THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

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1. INTRODUCTION

It has been said that the “major project” of the Second Temple period was the “amalgamating, through interpretation, [of] concepts from diverse biblical strata in a Hellenistic environment.”¹ I shall argue that the treatment of the concepts of νόμος and νόμοι, i.e., of “Law” (in the sense of Torah) and “commandments,” in the Wisdom of Solomon should be explored in the light of that hypothesis. Allusions to and invocations of the concept of “Torah,” as well as references to specific “Torah” texts, in the Wisdom of Solomon and in other examples of Jewish “Wisdom literature” of the Hellenistic and Roman periods will provide ample material to test the hypothesis.

2. NOMOS, NOMOI, AND RELATED TERMS IN THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

The Wisdom of Solomon provides a particularly fascinating example of Jewish Hellenistic “Wisdom literature.”² It contains a number of references to νόμος and νόμοι respectively, some of them in key passages of the book. The references in question are found in Wis 2:11–2; 6:4; 6:18; 9:5; 14:16; 16:6; 18:4; 18:9.


² Contrary to James Davila (The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other? [Leiden: Brill, 2005], 220–25), the present author operates on the basis of the assumption that the book of Wisdom is a Jewish, not a Christian text. Generally speaking, one might note that—if one assumes Wisdom to be not a first-century BC, but a first-century AD text in the first place—it makes little sense to try to differentiate between “Jewish” and “Christian” in that century, as has been demonstrated by Daniel Boyarin, Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), passim. More specifically, there is no trace whatsoever in the book of Wisdom of specifically Christian theologoumena.
Fichtner, in a commentary on Wisdom which is one of the shortest, but also one of the best commentaries written on the book, does not indiscriminately translate every occurrence of νόμος/νόμοι as “law”/“laws.” He opts for “Gesetz”/“Gesetze” in the following cases: 2:12; 6:4; 14:16; 16:6; 18:4; 18:9. With regard to the other instances, he chooses “Maßstab” (2:11), and “Gebote” (6:8; 9:5) respectively.

As we shall see soon, Fichtner probably did not make the right call in every single one of these instances. On the following pages, we shall explore all passages in the book of Wisdom that contain instances of the use of νόμος and νόμοι. First we shall try to answer the question as to which of the instances listed above really refer to “Torah.” In order to find that out we shall have to look at the wider contexts of the occurrences in question. What are the contexts for the uses of νόμος and νόμοι in the Wisdom of Solomon?

Let us start with 2:11–2: In v. 11, νόμος is mentioned, but in a non-specific sense. It is best translated as “measure,” “yard-stick” (cf. Fichtner’s “Maßstab für das, was Gerechtigkeit ist” and Winston’s “standard of our right”). However, in v. 12 νόμος clearly refers to the Torah. The wicked are portrayed as saying that “he [i.e., the just man] blames us for sins against the law and accuses us of sins against our education” (2:12). Given the context, παιδεία can only be a reference to education; it stands in parallel with νόμος, and the verse leads over to the statement in v. 13, where we have “knowledge of God” explicitly mentioned as being a characteristic feature of the just man. Translating it as “education” finds further support in the use of παιδεία in 6:17.

The νόμος in v. 12 is the Torah, which the wicked transgress and the just adhere to. It thus becomes clear, right at the beginning of the book, that the author of Wisdom sees adherence to the Torah as probably the most distinctive characteristic of the life of the just. It enables the just man to call himself a “child of the Lord” (2:13).

The νόμος is a key feature not just of the life of the δίκαιος generally but also of the life of the king specifically. In 6:4, the Torah is seen in the context...