The Simple Bare Necessities: Is Pss. Sol. 5 a Wisdom Prayer?

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1 Introduction

In a recent article, the German scholar Stefan Schreiber asks, “Can wisdom be prayer?” Raising such a question fits very well with the theme of this book, Rethinking the Boundaries of Sapiential Traditions. It does of course imply taking risks and rethinking the category of Wisdom literature, as Hindy Najman has reminded us. Schreiber studied the Psalms of Solomon, and he correctly identifies the corpus as a good example of sapiential prayers, that is, prayers that contain an element of wisdom.

This corpus of eighteen texts is not very well known apart from those scholars who have an interest in ancient messianism, as the texts contain the first

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2 First of all, a wisdom prayer should be defined. See the contribution of Stuart Weeks in the present volume on the difficulty of characterizing a wisdom text; see also Roger N. Whybray, “The Wisdom Psalms,” in Wisdom in Ancient Israel. Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton (ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon and Hugh G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 152–60 (esp. p. 152). Even those psalms not in the form of a prayer might have been used as such (ibid., p. 154). Note also the position of Schreiber in “Can Wisdom Be Prayer?,” p. 96. According to Whybray, “The Wisdom Psalms,” p. 157: “Wisdom and Worship, if they were ever separate, came together here.” Sirach 39:5–6 shows that writing psalms is a pious practice (ibid., p. 157). Therefore, Whybray (ibid., p. 158) suggests a definition of the genre: “It would be justifiable to call a psalm a ‘wisdom psalm’ only if its resemblance to some part of the Old Testament wisdom books—Proverbs, Job, or Ecclesiastes—were so close as to be undeniable” (e.g. Pss 34, 37, and 78).


4 So Falk, “Psalms and Prayers,” p. 39, suggests studying these texts as prayers.

5 See also Matthew E. Gordley, Teaching through Song in Antiquity: Didactic Hymnody among Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians (WUNT 2/302; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).
attestation of the expression Χριστός κύριος and one of the first descriptions of what could be a “messiah.” They are also known as a primary source for studies of Pompey’s military campaign and the beginning of Herod’s reign, and they contain many cryptic allusions to contemporary events. One example is the word δράκων (Pss. Sol. 2:25), which is probably an allusion to Pompey. The allusions made focus on the fate of an unknown community that has traditionally been viewed as interpreting its difficulties and persecution as pedagogic measures from God. By using the words παιδεύω, παιδεία, and παιδευτής, the community’s suffering is understood as the necessary process by which its members could be cleansed of their sin.

As I have argued elsewhere, some of the Psalms of Solomon were prayers for those who were being disciplined rather than explanations of a terrible historical event. A pious person who prays these prayers will desire God’s discipline.

This concept was coined in a scribal milieu. Scribes in training had to be disciplined and corrected after each error so as to become perfect. A perfect scribe not only masters the skill of writing, but also is a person of worth and trust in an illiterate world, as he is the only one who can check his own work. In the process of becoming a scribe, a student being disciplined is not beaten to death, but only with the goal of improving his skill. In an analogous view, according to these psalms, a believer could pray to God to endure the divine discipline that would help him become righteous and not a sinner. In fact, a sinner is mostly someone who has not been disciplined and consequently cannot avoid sinning, who will therefore be judged for his numerous sins. In other words, the concepts that lie behind the Psalms of Solomon are not to be

7 See the most recent commentary: Kenneth Atkinson, I Cried to the Lord: A Study of the Psalms of Solomon’s Historical Background and Social Setting (JSJSup 84; Leiden: Brill, 2004).
9 This claim for a scribal milieu is also found in Schreiber, “Can Wisdom Be Prayer?,” p. 100. One cannot, however, overemphasize this assertion. By claiming that scribes were authors of this corpus, we simply categorize them as being able to write, well-educated, and expert in the knowledge of Scripture, but we are not able to clearly define their beliefs. Those who wrote the Qumran sectarian documents or even the Enochic literature must also have been scribes, even if these documents are very different.