THE EXEGETICAL BACKGROUND
OF THE "AMBIGUITY OF DEATH"
IN THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

by

KARINA MARTIN HOGAN*

The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL

One of the most often-discussed issues in scholarship on the Wisdom of Solomon is the author’s understanding of death and its relationship to human sinfulness. This problem has been addressed most recently and, in my view, most successfully, by Michael Kolarcik, SJ. Kolarcik demonstrates through a literary analysis of the structure and judicial imagery of Wis 1:1-6:21 that the author’s central purpose in these chapters is to refute a false notion of death, placed on the lips of “the ungodly” (ἀσεβείης; 1:9 etc.). Pseudo-Solomon uses the underlying image of a trial to pit the nihilistic attitude of “the ungodly” toward mortality against the hope of “the righteous” for immortality; the reader is called upon to judge between the two. Kolarcik’s conclusion is that Pseudo-

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3 Ibid., 160.

Solomon’s use of various terms for death (θάνατος, ἀπολεία, ἀθερός, τέλος, ἐκβασις, ἔξοδος, etc.) is deliberately ambiguous because his purpose is to show that death means different things to the righteous and the ungodly. Whereas the wicked make no distinction between physical mortality and the death of the soul, the righteous know that their souls are immortal and destined for union with God after (physical) death. Ironically, they are both right from Pseudo-Solomon’s point of view, since he believes that the immortality of the soul is contingent upon the way one chooses to live one’s life. The ungodly forfeit immortality through their sinful lives, so for them, physical death does amount to annihilation. Hence physical death can be presented as a punishment for wickedness, but for the righteous it represents a limit to suffering and a path to union with God.

By examining the statements about death in Wis 1-6 in the context of the complex argument in which they occur, Kolarcik has shown that Pseudo-Solomon’s perspective on death is more coherent than many scholars have supposed. Earlier scholars tended to isolate the most striking statements about death in Wisdom (especially 1:13 and 2:23-4) and to interpret them in light of Gen 1-3, to which these and several other verses in Wisdom allude. The problem with this approach, Kolarcik points out, is the temptation to read one’s preconceptions about the “Creation and Fall” into the ambiguous statements about death in Wisdom. Kolarcik does not completely avoid this pitfall himself, however. He offers his own interpretation of Gen 1-3 (informed by contemporary biblical scholarship) in order to establish that “the interpretation [of Gen 1-3] whereby human mortality is taken as the consequence of Adam’s disobedience is not self evident” in Wis. Kolarcik’s brief exegesis of Gen 1-3 contributes little to his argument for the ambiguity of death in Wisdom. Rather than arguing on the basis of what Gen 1-3 “actually says” about the origin of death, it would have been more fruitful to explore the exegetical background of Pseudo-Solomon’s allusions to Gen 1-3.

Kolarcik does suggest that Pseudo-Solomon’s understanding of Gen...