The Apocrypha:
WISDOM OF SOLOMON, SIRACH (Ecclesiasticus), BARUCH

Wisdom of Solomon

The Wisdom of Solomon, or the Book of Wisdom, is canonical (accepted) in the Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions. While it is not canonical in the Jewish and Protestant traditions, it is generally respected as a witness to Hebrew and Greek worldviews, including the Jewish understanding of life after death, and the personification of Wisdom as God's agent in creation.

Though titled, the Book of Wisdom is more than a collection of wise teachings such as those found in Proverbs, Sirach, and Ecclesiastes; rather, it is an appeal to pursue wisdom itself. Such wisdom is what King Solomon asks of God in 1 Kings—"**Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern this great people of yours"** (1 Kings 3:9)**?** Thus the Book of Wisdom is traditionally ascribed to Solomon; for it was common practice in the 1st century B.C. to attribute authorship to "great men" such as Solomon to lend the book greater credibility.

The author, a well-educated Jew from Alexandria, Egypt, was writing to his fellow Jews. He knew how difficult it was for them to maintain their faith and traditions living in Iraq and Syria, and he did not want them to succumb to the materialism of the surrounding nations. So the author uses Wisdom's teachings to highlight God's concern for man, reminding them of the essential truths about God and the relevance of the Jewish faith in their time.

The first section (chapters 1-5) contrasts the godly with the ungodly. The godly are the righteous who live in communion with God, while the ungodly are those who live only for the moment, never thinking about eternal life. Indeed, the ungodly pursue evil and make a covenant with death, tormenting and oppressing the godly. However, in due time God will right all wrongs. Eventually the ungodly will be punished and put to shame.

In the second section (chapters 6-9) the author speaks as though he himself is Solomon, recalling how Solomon prayed for wisdom and how God responded. Using many Old Testament figures, the author concludes with praise for wisdom's many benefits.

In the third section (chapters 10-12), the author contrasts the Egyptians and the Israelites. The Egyptians are a classic example of the ungodly, while the Israelites are God's Chosen People. One is punished; the other is protected. There is no mention of any of the grumbling or apostasy (renunciation of faith) of the Israelites throughout their prior wilderness experience; for this would not suit the author's main point: that those who follow wisdom are blessed and those who do not are punished.

At the same time, while the author admits the ungodly are slowly finding their way to the worship of the one Creator-God, they still practice the worship of "**irrational serpents and worthless animals**" (11:15). The author insists they are confusing creation and the Creator, and launches into a lengthy discourse on the absurdity of idol worship. Idols are made of wood and stone and are unable to see, hear, breathe or move, yet the people *worship* them!

Trying to understand the origin of idolatry, the author suggests two scenarios: maybe an ancient father lost a young son and carved a resemblance of him as a keepsake. Or maybe people wanted to gaze upon an image of their king whom they have never seen (14:15-17). Perhaps from there the practice took hold so that by the time of the Egyptians, idol worship was well established.

In the last section (12-19), the author returns to contrast God's treatment of the Egyptians and the Israelites. Among their many gods the Egyptians also worshipped frogs, believing them to be a watery symbol of fertility amidst the life-giving waters of the Nile. But then how could they suffer a plague of frogs? In contrast the Israelites wandered in the desert and God provided quail to satisfy their hunger. Again, the author does not mention that the Israelites grumbled about wanting to return to Egypt.

Furthermore, while God sent the Egyptians locusts, He punished the Israelites with snakes; the difference being that God provided a remedy for the Jews—a bronze serpent mounted on a pole for the people to gaze upon and be healed. Again, lightning and hail came down from heaven to punish the Egyptians, but *manna* came down to feed the Israelites. Finally, the death of Egypt's firstborn sons afflicted only them; the Israelites were spared. In all of these instances—including the Israelites' escape through the waters of the Red Sea—God clearly shows that He has ultimate sovereignty over all creation.

The author wants to show that Egypt deserved these punishments; not only because Pharaoh refused to let the people go, but because Egypt had originally invited the Israelites into their country as their *guests*. Thus the Pharaoh Ramses violated every ancient law of hospitality when he later reduced the Israelites to slavery.

Yet the Book of Wisdom ends on a positive note: **"In everything, O Lord, you have exalted and glorified your people, and you have not neglected to help them at all times and in all places"** (19:22).

Sirach

The Book of Sirach is also called *Ecclesiasticus*, which means "used in the church." The reason for its "second" name is because both Jews and Christians read from the Book of Sirach in their study and worship.

Sirach was written by a Jewish scribe who lived in Jerusalem in the late 2nd century B.C. His name was Jesus (a common name at the time), son of Eleazar, son of Sirach (Ben Sira). The book is similar to Proverbs in that the majority of Sirach's material is presented in short sayings. Ben Sira speaks in the first person, and sometimes with autobiographical details (e.g., 34:11; 38-39). Sirach's basic structure is that of sayings on many issues. For example, 42:15-43:35 is a song of praise to God the Creator, which is followed by a long section that honors the heroes of Israel's history (44:1-50:29).

Sirach was written at a time when Jewish identity was being threatened by the extensive influence of Greek culture. As such, he addresses many familiar issues: money, relationships, worship, business, and even table manners. Sirach wants to help the reader to be faithful even in the small things. The author also has much to say about choosing friends and dealing with life's practical problems. Similar to other authors of wisdom literature, he advocates prudence in speech and praises wisdom as the personification of a virtuous woman (4; 14-15).

Much of the book sounds like a father giving advice to a son. Some scholars think that the book was used to train young Jewish men for positions of leadership. Overall, Sirach was inviting

his contemporaries to return to their spiritual and scriptural roots. That is, the wisdom offered was not simply good advice, but an explanation of the Law of Moses; for wisdom is understood in relation to Israel's history and destiny.

In the Book of Sirach some scripture scholars see allusions to New Testament teachings. For example, "**Dispose of your treasure as the Most High commands, for that will profit you more than gold"** (Sirach 29:11). This passage resembles Jesus' teaching on the storing up of treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20). And there is also Mary's response to God: **"He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate"** (Luke 1:52), which resembles, **"The thrones of the arrogant God overturns and establishes the lowly in their stead"** (Sirach 10:14).

Baruch

Baruch was an early 7th century B.C. secretary to Jeremiah and a kind of partner in the prophet's ministry (Jeremiah 32; 36; 45). In fact, Baruch might even have been expected to succeed Jeremiah one day (Jeremiah 43:1-7). The text of Baruch is attributed to him because he and Jeremiah were the only ones who lived through the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., and who left behind a written record.

Baruch served Jeremiah while both were exiled in Babylon, along with King Jeconiah of Judah and the other exiles. In chapter 1:3-14, Baruch reads from his text and afterwards collects money from the faithful to be sent—along with his book—to Jerusalem. The money was for prayers and sacrifices for the good health and long life of King Nebuchadnezzar. But why pray for the king who holds them captive? They did simply because the king had power over them, and they wanted to stay in the king's good graces.

Baruch was popular with the Jews in Upper Syria and used extensively in Jewish worship. According to 1:14, the book itself, written in Hebrew, states that its purpose is to be used in the liturgy of the Temple and synagogues.

The themes of Baruch include confession of sins for disobeying God (1:1—2:10), a prayer for mercy (2:11—3:8), a desire for wisdom (3:9—4:14), and a message to the captives (4:5—5:9).

Written in Hebrew and later translated into Greek around the middle of the 2nd century B.C., Baruch transitions from Israel's suffering and repentance for sin (1:15 – 3:8) to allegiance to wisdom and eventual submissiveness to God's commands (3:9 – 4:4). As Baruch concludes, there are words of encouragement to persevere and the guarantee of divine assistance (4:5 – 5:9).

Baruch does not differentiate between the faithful and unfaithful Jews. All Jews are summoned to recognize the sins of the nation, repent, submit to the commandments, and anticipate divine help and intervention amidst a rehabilitated nation. For Catholics attending the Easter Vigil Mass, the sixth of seven readings is from Baruch 3:9-38, with its focus on the desire for wisdom and how to obtain it, and how the Messiah (as Wisdom) will live among all humanity.