

Proper 15
Cycle B RCL
Revised

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

This story gives an explanation for Solomon's wisdom, its nature, and its political impact. The Deuteronomistic Historian (Dtr) does not credit Solomon with much cleverness in statecraft or administration but does present him as the master of conventional wisdom, indeed as the greatest of the masters of wisdom. As author of 3000 proverbs (wisdom aphorisms), composer of music, and biological investigator along the lines of the Babylonian wisdom teachers, none was his equal. (See 1 Kings 4:29-34.) This wisdom is the gift the king received in our passage. Its effect is largely to impress foreign rulers and peoples with Solomon's intelligence so as to lead them into alliances of one kind or another with him. A paradigm example of the value of Solomon's fame for wisdom is the story of the visit to Solomon by the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1-13). Despite his wisdom, and its political effects, Solomon had a penchant for rich living that Dtr understands to be the foolishness that ultimately led to the political division of Israel into two relatively weak states.

Psalm 111

After the opening Hallelujah, this Psalm is an *acrostic*, *i. e.* the first verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*alef*), and each verse thereafter begins with a succeeding letter of the alphabet. This device aids in memorization but is somewhat limiting as a poetic device. Formally a *hymn*, this psalm is unusual among the hymns in containing specific thanksgivings for the good things God has done for Israel instead of for God's cosmic majesty and deeds. This suggests a different function in the Temple liturgy from that of other hymns.

OR

Proverbs 9:1-6

For the ancients, the term "wisdom" (Hebrew: *soxmah*; Greek: *sofia*; Egyptian: *ma^cat*) referred both to the collective knowledge and experience of the culture as well as to the organizing structure of all reality. For this reason many of Israel's neighbors treated Wisdom like a deity (usually an underworld deity), and this tradition carried over into our passage where Wisdom is personified, if not actually deified. The "seven pillars" of Wisdom's house (9:1) are the foundation piers of the universe (Proverbs 8:29, Psalm 82:5). The Israelites shared the Near Eastern idea that Wisdom was the agent of creation (Proverbs 8:22-30).

Psalm 34:9-14

This extended thanksgiving would be uttered aloud in the Temple in fulfillment of a vow made to God when praying for deliverance in a lament. The psalm recalls that the psalmist called upon the LORD in the midst of terror (vs. 4) and was delivered from trouble. Laments often include a promise to teach the congregation about God's faithfulness. (See, for instance Psalm 51:13.) This psalm fulfills just such a promise.

Ephesians 5:15-20

The injunction about being “wise” informs us that language of the wisdom tradition will likely be in play here. From the time of Daniel on, apocalyptic eschatology (end-of-the world belief) in Judaism used the language of wisdom to describe those who know the secret (Hebrew *raz*; Greek *mysterion*) of the coming kingdom of God. The NRSV’s “making the most of the time” in vs. 16 is a poor translation of a verb that means to *buy up* or *redeem*. In the second sense (*redeem*), it occurs twice in Galatians, and in the sense of *buy up* it occurs here and in the parallel passage in Colossians 4:5. The times are evil because we live in the present evil age, but the “wise” will know how to use their time in that age to good effect. (See Luke 16:1-9.) The ancients thought of the Spirit as the epitome of wisdom and rationality, with the Jewish philosopher Philo contending that the Hebrew prophets had been the first philosophers because they prophesied by the Spirit. Possession by the Spirit of God would be for our author the very opposite of emotional excess, and so the author contrasts excess consumption of wine with the presence of God’s Spirit (5:18). Warnings about the use and misuse of strong drink permeate the Hebrew wisdom writings and continue into the Jewish Talmud.

John 6:51-58

The author of this Gospel makes use of the reader’s superior knowledge of Christian worship and beliefs to make the opponents of Jesus appear utterly foolish. Here the reader knows from general Christian experience that the bread and wine of the holy meal are shared with the words “This is my body,” and “This is my blood.” Further, the reader also knows that in the Prologue of the Gospel (John 1:1-14) the author identifies Jesus with the divine *logos*, the creator and sustainer of the universe. The reader is then surprised and perhaps amused by the fact that Jesus’ audience here cannot understand what Jesus means when he contends that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to be raised on the last day. The foolish audience understands him to be speaking of some kind of cannibalism whereas the reader knows that the reference is to the Holy Eucharist, which brings them the benefits of the divine *logos*, including immortality.

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