



Goodness and Sincerity of Heart

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT introduces the Book of Wisdom and points to how wise living today involves caring for all life – Wis 1:1, 6-7, 12-15; 2:23-24.

Wis 1:1 *Love righteousness, you rulers of the earth,
think of God in goodness
and seek God with sincerity of heart; . . .*

Wis 1:6 *For wisdom is a kindly spirit, . . .*

12 *Do not invite death by the error of your life,
or bring on destruction by the works of your hands;
because God did not make death,
and does not delight in the death of the living.*

13 *For God created all things so that they might exist;
the generative forces of the world are wholesome,
and there is no destructive poison in them,
and the dominion of Hades is not on earth.*

14 *For righteousness is immortal.*

15 *But the ungodly by their words and deeds summoned death; . . .*

16 *for God created us for incorruption,
and made us in the image of God's own eternity,
but through the devil's envy death entered the world,
and those who belong to the devil's company experience it.*

The First Reading for the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (1 July 2018) is from the Book of Wisdom and it is eclectic: three verses from Chapter 1 (Wis 1: 13-15) and two verses from the second chapter (Wis 2: 23-24). This prompted me to be a little more expansive and choose seven verses from Wisdom 1 and the two verses from Wisdom 2. I want to have a more representative piece of text so that I might introduce you to the Wisdom literature. And I want the chosen text to enable us to explore how Wisdom writings provide a rich resource for ecological reading.

Types of Writing in Old Testament

Readers of Israel's scriptures, known by Christians as the Old Testament, are familiar with the different types of writing within it. So much is "historical", tracing the story of

the covenant relationship between God and Israel. To this is added the voices of Israel's prophets speaking God's challenges and promises to the nation. And there are 150 psalms – the nation's book of prayer. Probably the least known are the Wisdom writings, the latest collection to be added to Torah, History and Psalms. They are unique, rising from the reflection on life of the sages – wise ones of Israel. The Book of Wisdom was written around the first or second century BCE. It personifies Wisdom as female and sings her praises as well as calls readers to right living. It functions well, therefore, as a text to be read ecologically.

Wisdom Speaking to All of Us

The opening verse of the Book of Wisdom (Wis 1:1) singles out one group of readers: you rulers of the earth. We will extend the book's readers/recipients far beyond this exclusive, hierarchical and generally male-gendered group. An ecological perspective might lead us to name the recipients in this verse simply as "earthlings" (those of and on Earth) and to hear the sage's opening call: Love righteousness, you earthlings.

"Righteousness" is a key virtue in Israel's scriptures, especially in the call of the prophets and the prayers of the psalmist (eg, Psalm 37). It is the right ordering of relationships not only within the human community ("they shall be kept safe forever" (Ps 37:28a) but with the other-than-human: "the righteous shall inherit the land and live in it forever" (Ps 37:29).

We will always need to engage critically with righteousness or right ordering in different times and different places. For contemporary ecological readers, right ordering will be informed by what we now know of human dis-order in relation to Earth – our exploitation of water resources, our pollution of the oceans, our destruction of species and our lack of awareness and attention to ecological imperatives, like recycling.

Seek Goodness and Sincerity

As we read on as Earthlings invited to love right ordering, we encounter a further invitation: think of God

in goodness and seek God with sincerity of heart. This is another way of inviting us into the right ordering that is of God and can be discerned through a lens of goodness and sincerity of heart. And at this point of the unfolding of the universe, such "goodness" that is of God must include not only the human realm but also the other-than-human.

We know that today wisdom must extend beyond the human realm. The one who is "wise" is not only a lover of humanity but of the entire cosmos. We can acclaim wisdom as a "universal spirit" personifying such love.

In Wis 1:6, we hear the exclamation, "wisdom is a kindly spirit!", and further exploration reveals that the Greek word *philanthropos* used in this phrase means literally "love of the human one" (kindly). However, we know that today wisdom must extend beyond the human realm. The one who is "wise" is not only a lover of humanity but of the entire cosmos. Unfortunately, there is no Greek word for this cosmic love (as there is for love of the human) but we can acclaim wisdom as a "universal spirit" personifying such love.

Avoid Causing Death

Wisdom 1:12 –14 yields very readily to an ecological reading shaped by an expanded consciousness. The death and destruction that the sage calls to readers' attention will be perceived as more expansive than that afflicting the human community. Wisdom calls her readers/hearers to avoid inviting death by the error of their lives. We can understand that as the death of sea creatures choked by the plastics in our oceans, pollution and destruction by pesticides and other toxic chemicals in some of the planet's richest lands and waterways.

The sage challenges her ecological

readers with the expansive claim that "God did not make death" nor does God "delight in the death of the living" – of anyone or anything living in the cosmos. Wisdom 1:14-15 closes this short invocation with a vision of hope for the human community informed by an ecological imperative:

... *God created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them*
... *righteousness [God's right ordering] is immortal.*

Wisdom's sage is attentive also to what is destructive of this right ordering, recognising that "the ungodly by their words and deeds summon death" (Wis 1:16).

Invitation to Reflect

The reading closes with Wis 2:23-24, a climax to our ecological interpretation. Wis 2:23 invites us, into God's eternity. However, the final verse reminds readers of the presence of death that the sage attributes to the work of the devil. But an ecological reader can bring a particular perspective on these final verses beyond that of the sage: both life and death may, indeed, be part of the cosmic processes that are unfolding in our extraordinary universe and both can be celebrated. Wisdom's sage is indeed a rich source of reflection for the ecological reader of the biblical text. ■

Painting: #411 by Bjorn Richter, Norwegian painter, sculptor, designer and writer © Used with permission. www.bjornrichter.no
"The sales of my work help me continue my (often idealistic) work for our planet. I began expressing my concern in painting in 1974 – probably the first artist to do this."



Elaine Wainwright is a biblical scholar specialising in eco-feminist interpretation and is currently writing a Wisdom Commentary on Matthew's Gospel.