

Proper 19
Cycle B RCL
Revised

Proverbs 1:20-33

Hebrew wisdom teachers always insisted that obedience to the commandments of God (“fear of the LORD”) was the only way to gain an understanding of wisdom. Great study, great privations, and great prowess were all insufficient to gain the fruits wisdom has to offer. So the poet here imagines wisdom as a lover of sorts calling young men to come out to her. Unlike those who seek the services of a harlot of the street, however, these young men will have to do the commandments in order to know wisdom. It may help the English reader to know that *wisdom* in Hebrew (*xoxmah*) is feminine in gender.

Psalm 19

This psalm contains portions of two different psalms. Psalm 19:1-6 is a fragment of a *hymn of praise* that probably comes from the temple rituals of Jerusalem before the Exile in 586 BCE. Psalm 19:7-14, is from a *wisdom psalm*. Wisdom psalms were not designed for use in the worship of the temple but for the instruction of students in the court schools. The “law of the Lord” (*torat adonay*) is not law as we might think of it but “instruction” such as a teacher might impart to a student

OR

Wisdom 7:26-8:1 (as canticle)

This passage follows the list of wisdom’s qualities in verse 22 and now proceeds to the question of wisdom’s relationship to God. Here we see the beginnings of the philosophy we associate with the city of Alexandria. Wisdom is a breath, an emanation, a reflection, and an icon of God. The Jewish philosopher Philo (c. 20 BCE- c. 50 CE), who also lived and taught in the city of Alexandria, worked this relationship out in exquisite detail in his commentaries on scripture, but the germ of the idea was already in the book of Wisdom. As in all Jewish wisdom, however, our passage also asks about our relationship to wisdom and those who keep the commandments. Wisdom enters their “holy souls” at birth, a possible reflection of the strong predestination taught by the Stoics.

OR

Isaiah 50:4-9

This is the third of the so-called “Servant Songs” (Isaiah 42:1-9; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12) incorporated by the Second Isaiah, the author of Isaiah 40-55. Both the identity of the servant and the independence of the songs have been debated for years, but many commentators believe that the songs represent exiled Israel, awaiting the salvation of God in Babylon.

Psalm 116:1-8

This is a *thanksgiving psalm*. When a Judahite experienced difficulties, that person was entitled to go up to the Temple in Jerusalem to implore the Lord’s aid. These prayers of entreaty, called “laments,” often contained a promise to declare to the congregation the Lord’s faithfulness and mercy in time of

trouble. Thanksgivings are the prayers by which such vows were completed. Note the reference in 116:3-4 to the previous lament.

James 3:1-12

Rabbinic literature is full of warnings against those who want to become teachers of the law. As teachers, they run the risk of leading Israel astray even if they only inadvertently mislead their students. Likewise, the tongue is dangerous because it can be used to slander another person. Slander is the one sin that both God and the person slandered must forgive because the slanderer uses the mouth that praises God to slander another person. “Why is slander called third? Because it kills three: the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is spoken.” (*Numbers R.* on 19:2) Researchers have sometimes taken the references in vss. 5-6 to fire to stem from the Stoic belief that all nature ultimately returns to a conflagration of fire. The tongue, then, would be the tiny organ that could ignite such a blaze. The allusion, however, is far from certain.

Mark 8:27-38

Caesarea Philippi was a pagan city whose protecting deity was the Greek god Pan--hence the site's modern name: Banyas. (Arabic does not have the sound /p/ and often substitutes /b/ for it in loan words.) Because of its idolatry, the rabbis did not even consider the city to be part of the Land of Israel. For Peter to confess Jesus to be the Messiah in this place, as opposed, say, to Jerusalem, asserts that his messiahship has meaning for pagans as well as for Jews. The passage contains the first of three predictions of Jesus' passion in Mark (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34). Peter cannot understand how Jesus could be King Messiah on the one hand and on the other hand expect to suffer and die in Jerusalem.

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