

Proper 20
Cycle B RCL
Revised

Proverbs 31:10-31

This poem is an acrostic, *i. e.* each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The entire poem is a separate composition, but the editor has placed it here to answer the charge the unknown king Lemuel's mother gave her son in Proverbs 31:3: "Don't give your strength (*xeylexa*) to women // or your ways to those who destroy (feminine plural) kings." Verse 31:10 reads "A woman of might, who might find her? // Her price is for more than corals." So instead of women who have the power to take away the king's might and frustrate his rule, the king should marry a "women of might" (*eshet xayil*) who will treat him well (31:12). This strong woman will rule the king's household and increase its worth through her industry. The original acrostic was designed to remind young men of the best qualities in a wife. The application to Lemuel is secondary.

Psalm 1

Scholars of the royal court's school in Jerusalem composed *wisdom psalms* to help young pupils understand and apply the fundamentals of honesty, modesty, and right-dealing to every aspect of their lives. Although these songs were not composed for the temple, as were the other psalms of the Psalter, they came to be part of Israel's treasury of sacred songs during the exile in Babylon when the temple stood in ruins.

or

Wisdom 1:16-2:1 [6-11] 12-22

The Wisdom of Solomon addresses the first-century Jews of Alexandria, Egypt, encouraging them to hold fast to their faith in times of misunderstanding and even persecution. Composed in Greek, this work is an attempt to express Jewish thought in terms of contemporary Greek and Roman ideas and is related in spirit to the philosophical work of the Alexandrian Jewish scholar Philo (20 BCE – 50 CE). One of the new ideas this book champions is that of the immortality of the soul, and the current passage argues that failure to believe in immortality and divine rewards and punishments after death results in the persecution of the righteous.

OR

Jeremiah 11:18-20

This is the beginning of the "first lament" of Jeremiah (11:18-12:6), the first of six such complaints to the Lord about the personal dangers and shame occasioned by his prophecy (15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13; 20 14-18). These verses may actually come from a personal lament in that it contains both a complaint (verses 18-19) and a statement of trust, both quite usual in the laments. In context, however, these words apply specifically to the people of Jeremiah's own home town, Anathoth, who seek to silence the prophet by any means necessary.

Psalm 54

Unlike other individual *laments* that complain of various problems, this lament focuses on the

single problem of wicked enemies. Although some researchers have suggested that the wicked enemies in such laments are, in fact, demonic powers, most now believe that personal, human enemies are the object. Surely, God will vindicate the righteous psalmist against the attacks of ruthless and insolent people. Verses 6-7 promise that the psalmist will return to the temple to offer a liturgy of thanksgiving if God grants the psalmist's petition.

James 3:16-4:3, 7-8a

The description of the person at war within himself or herself is a result of what the author thinks of as an adulterous love for the world and its pleasures (4:4). This love of the world brings about incessant bickering and even violence within the Christian community (4:1-3). Verse 5 contains a reference from a work evidently considered scripture in James' community but completely unknown to us.

Mark 9:30-37

This is the second of three predictions of Jesus' passion in Mark (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34). The reference to "the house" (9:33) in Capernaum is a reference to Jesus' specialized instruction to his inner core of students. (See also 7:17). Important rabbinic scholars were sometimes said to have created a "house," *i. e.* a school of interpretation that was carried on by the scholars' students after his death. Completely confused by his prediction of his death and resurrection, Jesus's disciples had been arguing about their relative position in his "house" (his academy) after his death. The "little child" of verse 36 recalls the association of such little children with the heavenly kingdom (*e. g.* Psalm 8:2). Jesus's "house" is in fact nothing less than the kingdom of God.

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