

# **WISDOM 1:1 – 6:21**

**<sup>1</sup>Love justice, you who rule the earth. In goodness be mindful of the Lord, and seek him in sincerity of heart. <sup>2</sup>He is found by those who do not put him to the test, and reveals himself to those who put their trust in him.**

**<sup>3</sup>Perverse thinking separates people from God, and when God's power is put to the test, it exposes the foolish.**

**<sup>4</sup>Wisdom will not enter a fraudulent soul, or make her home in a body enslaved to sin.**

The author is addressing the Roman authorities whose rule extended to Alexandria. Justice (Greek: δικαιοσύνη) is a central virtue expected of anyone who governs. To love (ἀγαπάω) justice is to choose justice and to act in accordance with it. The Psalmist, addressing the king of Israel, sings:

You love justice and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

– Psalm 45:7-8

Proverbs insists on the importance of justice for good government:

By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me rulers rule, and nobles, all who govern rightly.

– Proverbs 8:15-16

It is an abomination for kings to do evil, for the throne is established by justice.

– Proverbs 16:12

A wise king winnows the wicked, and drives the wheel over them ... Loyalty and faithfulness preserve the king, and his throne is upheld by justice.

– Proverbs 20:26,28

Take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in justice.

– Proverbs 25:5

The source of rule and the source of justice is God. A ruler, therefore, must be mindful of God ('the Lord'; that is, YHWH) and seek God in sincerity of heart (verse 1). The Deuteronomist warns:

Do not put YHWH your God to the test.

– Deuteronomy 6:16

The author's interest in philosophy already shows in his focus on thinking (λογισμός; verse 3).

'Wisdom' (σοφία) covers all areas of know-how (skill), especially skill in the art of living a good life, firstly in relation to God, and then in relation to others and to oneself. The tradition acknowledged God as the source of wisdom. The author, as we will see, highlights this essential dimension. We can be wise only by being in communion with God.

Listen to the Psalmist:

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel.

– Psalm 73:23-24

We are to find our delight in this communion:

Take delight in YHWH, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

– Psalm 37:4

The psalter opens with a psalm that speaks of the foundations of wisdom:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of YHWH, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for YHWH knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Trust in God is essential in the important enterprise of seeking wisdom (verse 2). This is because God ‘knows the way of the righteous’ (Psalm 1) – a knowing that implies intimate communion. While for the author wisdom is much wider than the ‘law of YHWH’, it is expressed there in a special way. The Jews have been chosen to offer the wisdom of the law to the world.

The distinction in verse 4 between the ‘soul’ (ψυχή) and the ‘body’ (σῶμα) is drawn, not from Jewish tradition, but from the Greek philosophers. ψυχή is used 25 times in Wisdom. σῶμα is used 5 times. When ψυχή occurs elsewhere in the Septuagint (856 times) it means ‘life’, or the ‘conscious self’ or the ‘individual person’. When σῶμα is used elsewhere in the Septuagint (114 times), where it does not mean “a dead body”, it, too, generally stands for the person, with the focus on a person’s physical, material reality. The idea, espoused by the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, of a human being consisting in a ‘soul’ inhabiting a ‘body’ comes from the author’s study of the contemporary Greek schools of philosophy.

As will become clear in the following verses, his understanding is that the soul is immortal. The traditional Jewish wisdom, as exemplified in the Book of *Proverbs* and in the *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, is that physical death is the end of communion with God and so the end of life. What is new here in the Wisdom of Solomon is the idea that when we die physically the soul is released and the body corrupts in the grave. If we live wisely, we (that is the soul freed from the body) will enjoy communion with God, the source of life and wisdom. In verse 4 he is making the point that wisdom cannot dwell in a soul that inhabits ‘a body enslaved to sin.’

Philo, a Jew writing in Alexandria and a contemporary of the author (it is possible that the author draws on Philo), is fond of speaking of the human soul as being the place where wisdom loves to ‘make her home’ (see verse 4). Philo and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon share this idea with the contemporary Stoics.

The all-knowing spirit

**<sup>5</sup>For a holy and disciplined spirit will flee from deceit, will leave foolish thoughts behind, and will be ashamed at the approach of injustice.**

**<sup>6</sup>Wisdom is a kindly spirit, and she will not free blasphemers from the guilt of their words; because God is witness of their inmost feelings, a true observer of the heart, who hears every word.**

**<sup>7</sup>The spirit of the Lord fills the world, and that which holds all things together knows all that is said.**

The distinction between ‘soul’ (ψυχή) and ‘spirit’ (πνεῦμα) is a traditional one. Whereas the ‘soul’ traditionally stands for the human person, the ‘spirit’ always includes a direct reference to God. It is the life we experience, a life (breath) that is constantly breathed into us by God. When the author here refers to the spirit as ‘holy’ he is acknowledging that it is God’s holy spirit dwelling in the soul. The Psalmist prays:

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

– Psalm 51:11

In the Isaiah scroll we read of those who rebelled and grieved YHWH’s holy spirit.

– Isaiah 63:10

In reference to the king, Isaiah declares:

The spirit of YHWH will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of YHWH.

– Isaiah 11:2

‘Kindly’ in verse 6 translates φιλόανθρωπος (see also 7:23 and 12:19). The spirit of wisdom is all-embracing, for God loves everything he has made (see 11:24). However, just as the spirit of wisdom cannot enter a deceitful soul (verse 4), so it cannot stay where there is deceit, folly or injustice. We cannot hide from God who sees our ‘innermost feelings’ (νεφρός). God is ‘true’ (ἀληθής) and sees things as they really are. He sees our ‘heart’ (καρδία) and knows everything that issues from it. The Psalmist writes:

Even before a word is on my tongue, YHWH, you know it completely.

– Psalm 139:4

Verse 7 picks up the thought of Jeremiah:

Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?  
says YHWH. Do I not fill heaven and earth?

– Jeremiah 23:24

The idea is developed in Psalm 139:7-10. We recall also the vision of Isaiah:

Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.

– Isaiah 6:3

The idea of the divine spirit holding all things together (τὸ συνέχον τὰ πάντα, verse 7) was first developed by the Stoics. It is found in Philo. Paul speaks in similar terms of the risen Christ (see Colossians 1:17; see also Hebrews 1:3).

Justice (δίκη, verse 8) was personified in Greek literature. As the virgin daughter of Zeus, she accused those who lived unjustly before her father.

‘Scheming’ (verse 9) translates διαβούλιον. Much the same idea is found in the Psalmist:

In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor – let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.

– Psalm 10:2

Those who live unjustly are referred to in verse 9 as the ‘ungodly’ (ἀσεβής). The Israelites were accused of ‘grumbling’ (γογγυσμός, verse 10) during their journey through the wilderness (see Exodus 16:7-12). Living a lie is not truly living. It ‘destroys the soul’ (verse 11). The godless are the walking dead. In *Proverbs* Wisdom proclaims:

Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from YHWH; but those who miss me cause themselves harm; all who hate me love death.

– Proverbs 8:35-36

As with the Greeks so with Jewish Wisdom literature we find two notions that were held in unresolved tension. One is that everything that happens happens in accordance with the will of God. The other is that we are responsible for our own evil actions. The second idea is expressed in verse 12.

The author is speaking of what we might call spiritual death (compare Romans 6:23). Physical death, which is part of the human condition, comes to all and is part of God’s design.

‘Hades’ (ᾠδης) is the underworld ruled by Death. It is God who rules the earth. Those who live unjustly are choosing destruction. Justice (δικαιοσύνη, see verse 1), is immortal’ (ἀθάνατος). It comes from the immortal God and those who live by it will achieve immortality (see 3:4). This is the only occurrence of the adjective ‘immortal’ in the *Wisdom of Solomon*. In the Septuagint it is found elsewhere only in Ben Sira who declares that ‘human beings are not immortal’ (Sirach 17:30). Our author draws on Plato, but he speaks, not of the indestructibility of the soul, but of an immortality that consists in eternal communion with God and is a gift from God (see 3:4; 4:1; 8:13, 17; 15:3).

**<sup>8</sup>Those, therefore, who live unjustly will not escape notice, and justice, when it accuses, will not overlook them. <sup>9</sup>For inquiry will be made into the scheming of the ungodly, and a report of their words will come before the Lord, to convict them of their lawless deeds.**

**<sup>10</sup>A zealous ear hears all things, and the sound of grumbling does not go undetected. <sup>11</sup>Beware then of useless grumbling, and keep your tongue from speaking evil of God; for no secret word will go unheeded, and lying speech destroys the soul.**

**<sup>12</sup>Do not court death by the error of your life, or bring down destruction by your own actions.**

**<sup>13</sup>For God did not make death, and takes no delight in the destruction of the living. <sup>14</sup>He created all things that they might endure. The generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them. The dominion of Hades is not on earth.**

**<sup>15</sup>Justice is immortal.**

**1:16**The ungodly by their words and deeds have summoned Death; considering him a friend, they pined for him, and made a pact with him, for they are fit to belong to his company.

**2:1**In their faulty way they reasoned, saying to themselves, "Short and filled with trouble is our life, and there is no remedy when life comes to its end. No one has been known to return from Hades.

**2**We came to be by mere chance, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been, for the breath in our nostrils is but a puff of smoke, and reason is a spark kindled by the beating of our hearts. **3**When it is extinguished, the body will turn to ashes, and the life breath will be scattered like the air. **4**Our name will be forgotten with the passing of time. No one will remember our deeds; our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud, and be scattered like mist that is chased by the rays of the sun, overcome by its heat. **5**Our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and at our end there is no coming back. It is sealed up and no one can change it.

**6**"Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things at hand, and make use of creation with youthful zest.

**7**Let us take our fill of costly wine and perfumes, and let no blossom of spring pass us by. **8**Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they wither. **9**Let no meadow fail to share in our revelry; everywhere let us leave signs of our enjoyment. This is our portion, our birthright.

Having spoken of the contrast between those who live according to the God's will (the 'just', the 'righteous', the 'godly'), and those who do not (the 'unjust', the 'unrighteous'), the author now focuses on the latter, whom he calls here 'the ungodly' (verse 16, see verse 9). Whereas the just are faithful to the covenant (δικαίωσις) made to them by God, the ungodly have made a pact (συνθήκη) with Death (an expression borrowed from Isaiah 28:15).

The author has the ungodly speak for themselves, in the manner of a Hellenistic diatribe. Their opening statement has echoes of Qohelet:

What do mortal human beings get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? All their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation.

– Ecclesiastes 2:22-23

Clearly they see death as the end of personal life.

'Chance' (verse 2) played a central role in the philosophy of the Epicureans. The image of the soul as being a spark of intelligent breath that has its seat in the heart (verse 3) is an image drawn from the Stoics. Most Greek philosophers considered the heart (not the head) as the seat of thought.

The author shows his poetic skill in verses 3-5. The images were familiar to students of Hellenistic philosophy.

Verses 6-9 echo Isaiah:

Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.

– Isaiah 22:13

Qohelet's advice was to get as much enjoyment as possible from the present moment (see Ecclesiastes 9:7; 11:9), so long as we realise that 'for all these things God will bring you to judgment' (Ecclesiastes 11:9). The godless here ignore this judgment!

Not being content to get whatever pleasure they can from life, the ungodly urge each other on to use their power to oppress the poor, especially those who are living in accordance with the will of God. The ungodly despise weakness as being of no use (ἄχρηστος), and believe that if you have the power to do something you not only can do it; you should do it.

Moreover, they are embarrassed by the godly who criticise their lifestyle as being contrary to the revelation made by God to Moses ('sinning against the law', verse 12), and so of being false to the education they have received.

The ungodly scoff at the notion that the righteous poor could have 'knowledge of God'. They find their claim to be a 'child of God' preposterous. The phrase 'child of God' is drawn from the Isaiah scroll in which YHWH calls the one he has raised up to redeem the people from exile in Babylon 'my child/servant' (παῖς; Isaiah 52:13).

How dare these helpless people criticise the ungodly, who can do whatever they choose! How dare they look down on them, and consider them counterfeit, when it is they, the ungodly, who see through the nonsense spoken by the poor to cover up their helpless and useless condition! How dare they make the outlandish claim that God is their 'father' (verse 16).

We recall the prayer of Ben Sira:

O Lord, Father and Master of my life,  
do not abandon me to their designs,  
and do not let me fall because of them!  
O Lord, Father and God of my life!

– Sirach 23:3-4

**<sup>10</sup>Let us use our power to oppress the righteous poor man; let us not spare the widow nor honour the gray hairs of the aged. <sup>11</sup>Let our might be the measure of our right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless.**

**<sup>12</sup>Let us lie in wait for the righteous man. His presence is inconvenient to us. He opposes what we do; he reproaches us for sinning against the law, and accuses us of being false to our training.**

**<sup>13</sup>He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. <sup>14</sup>He is a living reproof of our designs; <sup>15</sup>just seeing him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange.**

**<sup>16</sup>We are considered by him as counterfeit. He avoids us as unclean; he pronounces happy the final lot of the righteous, and boasts that God is his father.**



**<sup>17</sup>Let us see if his words are true. Let us test what will happen to him at the end of his life.<sup>18</sup>If the righteous man is God's son, God will help him, and deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.<sup>19</sup>Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how reasonable he is. Let us see if he can remain clear of evil.<sup>20</sup>Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be delivered."**

**<sup>21</sup>Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray. Blinded by their malice,<sup>22</sup>they did not know the secret purposes of God. They entertained no hope that holiness would have its reward. They passed up the prize of unblemished souls.**

**<sup>23</sup>God, however, created man in a state of incorruption, and made man an image of his own eternity.**

**<sup>24</sup>It was through the devil's envy that Death entered the world, and those who belong to Death's company experience him.**

Since the ungodly believe that everyone is really acting out of self-interest, they want to put to the test those who claim to be godly. They are convinced that when the pressure is put on the just they will prove themselves to be no better than the ungodly whom they love to criticise. The ungodly are completely confident that the claim to be under God's protection will easily be proved false. Might will prove to be right. Reading verses 17-20 we recall the words thrown at Jesus (see Matthew 27:43 and John 5:18).

The author's judgment of the ungodly is immediate. They are 'led astray', 'blinded by their own malice'(verse 21). 'Secret purposes' translates *μυστήρια*. This is the first of only four uses of the word in the *Wisdom of Solomon* (see 6:22; 14:15 and 14:23). He is speaking of the idea of life beyond physical death, and he is calling it a 'mystery'; that is to say, something that God has revealed, but it can be grasped only by those who accept the limits of reason and are open to the wonder of God's 'secret purposes'.

In verse 23 'incorruption' translates *ἀφθαρσία*(see also 6:18, 19). It is a word borrowed from the Epicureans for whom it was a quality special to the gods. For our author it is God's will to give us a share in it. 'Image' translates *εἰκὼν* (from which the English 'icon'), a word that the author will use again in 7:26; 13:13, 16; 14:15, 17; 15:5 and 17:20. We find this word used in the creation account of Genesis:

God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness."

– Genesis 1:26 (see 1:27; 5:1, 3; 9:6).

'Eternity'(*ἀϊδιότητος*) is a word from Hellenist literature, not the Septuagint. If verse 24 is alluding to the Genesis story it is one of the earliest extant Jewish texts to equate the serpent with the devil. The author here is speaking of spiritual death, not physical death. Having made a pact with Death (see 1:16), the ungodly will surely experience 'him'.

'Envy' translates the Greek *φθόνος*. We are envious of what another has and we do not. Either we want it, or, if we can't have it, we want to deprive them of it. The devil does not enjoy communion with God (life), so he doesn't want human beings to have it either.



The author's thought has a parallel in Philo:

Wisdom taught Abraham that death is not the extinction of the soul but its separation and detachment from the body and its return to the place whence it came; and it came, as was shown in the story of creation, from God.

– De Abrahamo 258

'Peace' (εἰρήνη; see also 14:22) echoes Isaiah:

The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.

– Isaiah 32:17

For the author of the *Wisdom of Solomon* this peace is experienced by the soul after physical death.

In verse 4 for the first time our author speaks of 'immortality' (ἀθανασία; 'not dying'; see also 4:1; 8:13, 17; 15:3; see also the adjective in 1:15). This is not the indestructibility of the soul taught by Plato. It is eternal communion with God. Our author does not argue from the nature of the soul, but presents this idea as what God offers as a gift of grace. The idea of life beyond death was being espoused by some Jews, but our author envisages this life in a new way. It will be enjoyed by the human soul, freed from the body. The just will not die because their souls are 'in the hands of God' (verse 1), the source of life.

The author sees the suffering experienced by the just in this life as chastisement for their sins and as a testing of their virtue (verses 5-6).

For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says YHWH, your Redeemer.

– Isaiah 54:7-8

God accepts the offering which we make of ourselves to him when we submit to the test and continue to live justly in times of trial. 'Visitation' (verse 7) translates ἐπισκοπή. God, in his 'great kindness' has taken the just man into his eternal embrace. On the future star-like brilliance of the just see Daniel 12:3, and in the Newer Testament Matthew 13:43.

**<sup>1</sup>But the souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. <sup>2</sup>In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died. Their departure was thought to be a disaster, <sup>3</sup>their going from us to be their destruction. But they are at peace.**

**<sup>4</sup>For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality.**

**<sup>5</sup>Having been disciplined a little, they will be treated with great kindness, for God tested them and found them worthy of himself.**

**<sup>6</sup>Like gold in the furnace he tested them; like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them.**

**<sup>7</sup>In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will fly like sparks through the stubble.**

The just and the ungodly

**<sup>8</sup>They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will be their sovereign for all eternity.**

**<sup>9</sup>Those who trust in him will understand the truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his those he has called, and he watches over his holy ones.**

The idea that it will be the just who will set the standard for judgment is found in Daniel:

The Ancient One came and judgment was given for the holy ones of the Most High, and the time arrived when the holy ones gained possession of the kingdom.

– Daniel 7:22

We find the same idea in the Newer Testament:

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

– Matthew 19:28

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?

– 1Corinthians 6:2

Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge.

– Revelation 20:4

The vocabulary of verse 9 is very rich. For the first time (though see 1:2), the author speaks of ‘trust’ (πειθω; see also 13:7; 14:29; 16:8, 24). This is also his first mention of ‘the truth’ (ἀλήθεια; see also 5:6; 6:22). In this life reality can be hidden; appearances do not always reveal what is real. We understand ‘the truth’ when reality is manifest. Reality is ultimately God, and creatures as participating in the being of God.

This is the first and only time he speaks of the ‘faithful’ (πιστος). It is the first of three times he speaks of ‘love’ (ἀγάπη; see 6:17, 18). It is the first of six times he speaks of ‘grace’ (χάρις; see 3:14; 4:15; 8:21; 14:26; 18:2), and the first of eight times he speaks of ‘mercy’ (ἔλεος; see 4:15; 6:6; 9:1; 11:9; 12:22; 15:1; 16:10). It is also the first of eight times that he speaks of God’s ‘holy ones’ (ὁσίος; 4:15; 6:10; 7:27; 10:15, 17; 18:1, 5, 9). The nuance of ὁσίος is that the just have been taken into the realm of the sacred, away from any danger of pollution.

Verses 10-12 speak of the contrasting fate of the ‘ungodly’ (see already 1:9, 16), defined here as ‘those who disregarded justice and rebelled against the Lord’.

In contrast to the just, they ‘despise the discipline of wisdom’. The hope of the just ‘is full of immortality’ (3:4). Any hope the ungodly might entertain is empty. Everything they have ever done has come to nothing.

They have destroyed any hope they might have had for their family. Because of their behaviour their wives have learned nothing (ἄφρων; a word already found in 1:3 and 3:2). Their children are worthless (πονηρός; only here and 3:14; 12:10). Future generations will be under a curse; that is to say, the behaviour of the ungodly has withdrawn all hope of blessing.

In verse 13 the author breaks with tradition which thought that being barren was a punishment from God for sin. He declares that it is possible for a barren woman to be blessed (μακάριος; the only time the word is used by him). She can be spiritually fertile.

Similarly with the eunuch (verse 14). He is drawing on Isaiah 56:3-5. The ‘temple’ (verse 14) refers to God’s dwelling in heaven. This is because a man’s true glory and fame is not measured by the number of his offspring but by his virtue and understanding (φρόνησις).

Sometimes the children of a sinful sexual relationship appear to flourish, but ‘on the day of judgment’ all will be revealed. They will have no lasting honour (verses 16-19).

The author is trying to take away from the ungodly any hope that things will be all right for his family. The logic of his position is hardly persuasive. Surely the wife and children need not suffer because of the sin of their husband or father! (see Ezekiel 16:44).

**<sup>10</sup>But the ungodly will be punished as their scheming deserves, those who disregarded justice and rebelled against the Lord.**

**<sup>11</sup>Wretched indeed are those who despise the discipline of wisdom. Their hope is vain, their labours unprofitable, and their deeds futile.**

**<sup>12</sup>Their wives have learned nothing, their children are worthless, their lineage under a curse.**

**<sup>13</sup>Blessed is the barren woman who is undefiled, who has not entered into a sinful union; she will have fruit when God examines souls.**

**<sup>14</sup>So, too, the eunuch who has not acted contrary to the law, or planned wicked things against the Lord; for special favour will be shown him for his faithfulness, and a place of great delight in the temple of the Lord.**

**<sup>15</sup>For the fruit of honest toil is renowned, and the root of understanding does not fail.**

**<sup>16</sup>But children of adulterers will not come to maturity, and the offspring of an unlawful union will perish.**

**<sup>17</sup>Even if they live long they will be held of no account, and finally their old age will be without honour. <sup>18</sup>If they die young, they will have no hope and no consolation on the day of judgment. <sup>19</sup>For the end of an unrighteous generation is grievous.**

**<sup>1</sup>It is better to be childless with virtue, for in the memory of virtue is immortality, because it is virtue that wins recognition from both God and men.**

**<sup>2</sup>When it is present, people imitate it, and they long for it when it has gone. For all time it marches, forward, bearing a wreath, victorious in the contest for prizes that are undefiled.**

**<sup>3</sup>But the prolific brood of the ungodly will be of no use, and none of their illegitimate seedlings will strike a deep root or take a firm hold. <sup>4</sup>Even if their branches blossom for a while, standing insecurely they will be shaken by the wind, and by the violence of the winds they will be uprooted. <sup>5</sup>The branches will be broken off before they come to maturity, and their fruit will be useless, not ripe enough to eat, and good for nothing. <sup>6</sup>For children born of unlawful unions are witnesses of evil against their parents when God examines them.**

Verse 1 takes up the message of 3:13. What matters is the life of the soul. Bodily fertility is entirely secondary to productivity of the soul. For the first time the author introduces the term ‘virtue’ (ἀρετή; ‘moral excellence’, 5:13; 8:7). A traditional idea was that we would be immortal through the memory of our posterity (see Psalm 112:6; Proverbs 10:7). What matters, says our author, is virtue.

For the second time the author speaks of ‘immortality’ (see 3:4).

The righteous will be remembered forever.

– Psalm 112:6

The point is developed by Ben Sira (Sirach 44:8-15).

‘Time’ in verse 2 translates the Greek αἰῶν, which in the Hellenistic philosophy of the day referred to the divine dynamic power that penetrates the cosmos, as distinct from χρόνος, the measure of the constant movement of the ephemeral things of this world.

‘Bearing a wreath’ (στεφανηφορέω) was a technical term for magistrates in Hellenist times. It was also used in the mystery cults, especially those devoted to Dionysus.

In verses 3-6 he repeats, using different imagery, the message of 3:16-19.

Since the tradition saw physical death as the end of communion with God, the end of life, it almost necessarily saw an early death as a divine punishment, if not for one's own sins, then for the sins of one's forebears.

Our author believes in the immortality of the soul, so that physical death, rather than being the end of communion with God, opens the way for the righteous, freed from the body, to enjoy the intimate communion with God for which we were created.

Here he goes to great pains to explain the premature death of a just person in line with this new notion. Since the soul is immortal, length of life here in this world is not as important as the quality of a person's life. What matters is wisdom and virtue.

When a righteous person dies young it is because 'he was dearly love by God' (verse 10). God took him early to remove him from the temptations that are part of our earthly existence.

Some of the language suggests that the author has the story of Enoch in mind:

Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.

– Genesis 5:24

In the second part of verse 15 the author repeats what he has already said in 3:9.

In verses 17-20 the author highlights the blindness of the ungodly, and the dreadful fate that waits them. What we do matters, and we will have to face the consequences of the evil we have done.

**<sup>7</sup>The righteous person, though he die early, will be at rest. <sup>8</sup>It is not length of life that makes for an honourable old age. It is not the number of years, <sup>9</sup>but understanding. A blameless life is the true ripeness of age. <sup>10</sup>It is because he was pleasing to God and dearly loved by him, that while still living among sinners he was taken up, <sup>11</sup>snatched away lest evil affect his understanding or guile deceive his soul. <sup>12</sup>For the fascination of wickedness obscures what is good, and roving desire perverts the innocent mind. <sup>13</sup>Being perfected in a short time, he completed a full measure of time. <sup>14</sup>It is because his soul was pleasing to the Lord, that he took him quickly from the midst of wickedness.**

**<sup>15</sup>People see this and fail to understand, or take such a thing to heart, that grace and mercy are upon his those he has called, and he watches over his holy ones.**

**<sup>16</sup>The righteous who have died will condemn the ungodly who are living, and youth that is quickly perfected will condemn the prolonged old age of the unrighteous.**

**<sup>17</sup>They will see the end of the wise man, and will not understand what the Lord purposed for him, and why he took him into safe keeping. <sup>18</sup>They will see, and take no account of it, but the Lord will laugh them to scorn. After this they will become dishonoured corpses, an outrage among the dead forever; <sup>19</sup>for he will dash them speechless to the ground, and shake them from the foundations; they will be left utterly dry and barren, they will suffer anguish, and the memory of them will perish. <sup>20</sup>They will come with dread when their sins are reckoned up, and their lawless deeds will convict them to their face.**

**<sup>1</sup>Then the righteous will stand with great confidence in the presence of those who have oppressed them and those who made light of their labours. <sup>2</sup>When the unrighteous see them, they will be shaken with dreadful fear, and they will be amazed at the unexpected salvation of the righteous. <sup>3</sup>Full of remorse, they will say to one another, groaning and in anguish of spirit:**

**<sup>4</sup>“These are persons whom we once held in derision and made a byword of reproach – fools that we were! We thought that their lives were madness and that their end was without honour. <sup>5</sup>Why have they been numbered among the children of God? And why is their lot among the holy ones? <sup>6</sup>It was we who strayed from the way of truth. The light of righteousness did not shine on us, and the sun did not rise upon us. <sup>7</sup>We were entangled in the paths of lawlessness and destruction, and we journeyed through trackless deserts, but the way of the Lord we ignored. <sup>8</sup>What has our arrogance profited us? And what good has our boasted wealth brought us? <sup>9</sup>All those things have vanished like a shadow, and like a rumour that passes by; <sup>10</sup>like a ship that cuts through the billowy water, and when it has passed no trace can be found, no track of its keel in the waves; <sup>11</sup>or as, when a bird flies through the air, no evidence of its passage is found; the light air, lashed by the beat of its pinions and pierced by the force of its rushing flight, is traversed by the movement of its wings, and afterward no sign of its coming is found there; <sup>12</sup>or as, when an arrow is shot at a target, the air, thus divided, comes together at once, so that no one knows its pathway. <sup>13</sup>So we too, as soon as we were born, ceased to be, and we had no sign of virtue to show, but were consumed in our wickedness.”**

As background reading to this passage see Isaiah 52:13ff.

In verse 2 the author speaks of ‘salvation’ (σωτηρία; see 6:24; 16:6; 18:7). In this context it speaks of being delivered from death.

The speech of the unrighteous (verses 4-13) is to be read in the light of their earlier speech (2:1-20).

The ‘holy ones’ (ἅγιοις, verse 5) echoes 1:5 which spoke of the ‘holy spirit’ that cannot dwell with the unrighteous.

The unrighteous will have to face the folly of the choices they have made (verses 6-13).

The author employs image after image to underline the passing nature of everything that the unrighteous once prized. They have utterly wasted their life and have left nothing of value behind. There are echoes here of Ben Sira:

There is no memory of them;  
they have perished as though  
they had never existed; they  
have become as though they  
had never been born.

– Sirach 44:9.



In verse 14 the author gives his judgment on the unrighteous to whose words we have just listened.

With beautiful and powerful imagery he evokes the very different situation awaiting the righteous (verses 15-16). The goal of our existence is the enjoyment of eternal life with YHWH.

Verses 17-23 are modelled on Isaiah:

YHWH put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.

– Isaiah 59:17

Verse 17 is based on the mythical identification of the stars with divine beings, God's heavenly host. For creation as instruments of God's punishment compare Ben Sira:

There are winds created for vengeance, and in their anger they can dislodge mountains; on the day of reckoning they will pour out their strength and calm the anger of their Maker. Fire and hail and famine and pestilence, all these have been created for vengeance; the fangs of wild animals and scorpions and vipers, and the sword that punishes the ungodly with destruction. They take delight in doing his bidding, always ready for his service on earth; and when their time comes they never disobey his command.

– Sirach 39:28-31

In his concluding remarks (the second part of verse 23), the author warns those who abuse their power by oppressing the Jewish people that their lawless behaviour will 'lay waste the whole earth'. They, however, will not benefit from the devastation. They will suffer the fate described throughout this passage.

**<sup>14</sup>The hope of the ungodly is like thistledown carried by the wind, and like a light frost driven away by a gale; it is dispersed like smoke before the wind, and it passes like the remembrance of a guest who stays but a day.**

**<sup>15</sup>But the righteous live forever, and their reward is with the Lord; the Most High takes care of them.**

**<sup>16</sup>Therefore they will receive a glorious crown and a beautiful diadem from the hand of the Lord, because with his right hand he will cover them, and with his arm he will shield them.**

**<sup>17</sup>In his zeal he will take his full armour, and will arm all creation to repel his enemies. <sup>18</sup>He will put on righteousness as a breastplate, and wear impartial justice as a helmet; <sup>19</sup>he will take holiness as an invincible shield, <sup>20</sup>and sharpen his relentless wrath for a sword, and creation will join with him to fight against his frenzied foes. <sup>21</sup>Shafts of lightning will fly with true aim, and will leap from the clouds to the target, as from a well-drawn bow, <sup>22</sup>and hailstones full of wrath will be hurled as from a catapult; the water of the sea will rage against them, and rivers will relentlessly overwhelm them; <sup>23</sup>a mighty wind will rise against them, and like a whirlwind it will winnow them away.**

**Lawlessness will lay waste the whole earth, and evildoing will overturn the thrones of rulers.**



Those in power must learn wisdom

**<sup>1</sup>Listen therefore, you kings, and understand; take note, you lords of the ends of the earth. <sup>2</sup>Give ear, you who rule over multitudes, and boast of many nations. <sup>3</sup>Your dominion was given you by the Lord, your sovereignty is from the Most High. It is he who will scrutinise your actions and look into your plans.**

**<sup>4</sup>Because as servants of his kingdom you did not rule rightly, or keep the law, or walk according to the purpose of God, <sup>5</sup>he will come upon you terribly and swiftly, for severe judgment falls on those in high places. <sup>6</sup>The lowliest may be pardoned in mercy, but the mighty will be mightily tested. <sup>7</sup>The Lord of all will not stand in awe of anyone, or show deference to greatness. It was he himself who made both small and great, and he takes thought for all alike. <sup>8</sup>A strict inquiry is in store for the mighty.**

**<sup>9</sup>To you then, O monarchs, my words are directed, so that you may learn wisdom and not transgress. <sup>10</sup>For they will be made holy who observe holy things in holiness, and those who have been taught them will find a defence. <sup>11</sup>Therefore set your heart on my words; long for them, and you will be instructed.**

‘Lords of the ends of the earth’ is probably a reference to the spreading power of Rome (see 1:1).

The idea that it is God who determines who rules (see verse 3) is traditional. In the Older Testament we read:

It is God who deposes kings and sets them up.  
– Daniel 2:21

The government of the earth is in the hand of the Lord, and over it he will raise up the right leader for the time.

– Sirach 10:4

In the Newer Testament, John has Jesus say to Pilate:

You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.

– John 19:11

Paul writes to the Christian communities in Rome:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.

– Romans 13:1

The author is warning those in power that they will be judged by how they exercised the authority given them by God.

‘Takes thought for’ (verse 7) translates *πρὸνοέω*, a word taken for the Stoic notion of divine providence (see also 14:3; 17:2).

If they want to learn how to carry out their obligations properly they must learn wisdom (verse 9).

Three times in verse 10 he uses words derived from the Greek ὅσιος (‘holy’; see 4:15). If their actions flow from their communion with the Holy One and in accordance with the will of God, they will have their defence before God’s judgment seat.

He is about to speak to the rulers about wisdom (see verses 12-20). In verse 11 he exhorts them open their hearts to the instruction he is about to deliver.

There was no temple in Alexandria. This added to the temptation to embrace aspects of the mystical cult to the Egyptian goddess, Isis. Personifying Wisdom was part of the Jewish heritage (see Proverbs 8:1-36; Sirach 1:1-18; 24:1-27). The language in verses 12-16 echoes the language, not of the Septuagint, but of the Isis cult. Our author wants to get his student to penetrate deeply into their Bible. He wants to adapt its teaching to a new generation, and show that Wisdom surpasses Isis.

Wisdom is 'radiant' (λαμπρός). In the Book of Revelation the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb is as 'radiant' as crystal (Revelation 22:1), and Jesus is described as the 'radiant morning star' (Revelation 22:16).

The word 'unfading' (ἀμάραντος, verse 12) appears only here in the Older Testament. It is used twice in the Newer Testament. Peter speaks of the inheritance awaiting us in heaven as being 'unfading' (1 Peter 1:4). Similarly with the crown of glory (see 1 Peter 5:4).

In his opening words the author exhorted us to 'love righteousness' (1:1). Here he speaks of loving (that is, choosing and acting on) wisdom.

Verse 14 reminds us of the words of Jesus as found in the Book of Revelation:

I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

– Revelation 3:20

In the Platonic tradition 'understanding' (verse 15; φρόνησις) includes 'wisdom' (σοφία). It is the same here (see also 3:15).

The beautiful picture described in verse 16 is of divine wisdom taking the initiative, seeking out those who desire her, and meeting us as we journey along the way, inspiring every thought and aspiration (ἐπινοία).

**<sup>12</sup>Wisdom is radiant and unfading, easily discerned by those who love her, and found by those who seek her. <sup>13</sup>She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her.**

**<sup>14</sup>If you rise early to seek her you will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at your door.**

**<sup>15</sup>To fix your thought on her is perfect understanding, and if you are vigilant on her account you will soon be free from care.**

**<sup>16</sup>For she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them on their way, and comes to meet them in every thought, every aspiration.**

**<sup>17</sup>The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction, and concern for instruction is love of her. <sup>18</sup>Love of her is the keeping of her laws, and giving heed to her laws is assurance of incorruption, <sup>19</sup>and incorruption brings one near to God. <sup>20</sup>Thus the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom.**

**<sup>21</sup>If, then, you delight in your thrones and sceptres, you rulers over the nations, honour wisdom, so that you may reign forever.**

In verses 17-20 the author presents a series of steps, each one moving on from the one preceding it, to build to a conclusion that forces itself upon the reader by the power of the logical progression. Desire for wisdom leads to love of wisdom, which, in turn leads to heeding the laws of reason, to incorruption (see 2:23), and so to communion with God. This is the only kingdom that matters.

He concludes in verse 22 by exhorting those who exercise power to honour wisdom. That way, their reign will never end, reaching its perfection in unending communion with God, the source of wisdom.

Throughout this first section (1:1 – 6:21) the author has been stating that we are destined for immortality, for eternal communion with God. God wants us to enjoy this communion and continues to offer us a share in his divine wisdom, which will guide our thoughts, intentions and deeds.

He has presented two opposing life-paths. One path is taken by the wise, the righteous, who welcome wisdom and live accordingly. The other is taken by the unwise, the unrighteous, who reject wisdom and live accordingly. At the end of their life here on earth, the wise enjoy the communion with God for which we are created. The unwise will face the judgment they have earned by their wicked lives. They have despised wisdom and have oppressed the righteous. They will experience death. All they built up for themselves will be destroyed.