

WISDOM 11-19

¹Their works prospered at the hand of a holy prophet. ²They journeyed through an uninhabited wilderness, and pitched their tents in untrodden places. ³They withstood their enemies and fought off their foes.

⁴When they were thirsty, they called upon you, and water was given them out of flinty rock, from hard stone a remedy for their thirst.

⁵For through the very things by which their enemies were punished, they themselves received benefit in their need. ⁶Instead of the fountain of an ever-flowing river, stirred up and defiled with blood ⁷in rebuke for the decree to kill the infants, you gave them abundant water when all hope was gone, ⁸demonstrating by the thirst they had endured how you punished their enemies. ⁹For when they were put to the test, though they were being disciplined in mercy, they learned how the ungodly were tormented when judged in wrath. ¹⁰For you tested them as a parent does in warning, but you examined the ungodly as a stern king does in condemnation. ¹¹Both at home and abroad, they were equally distressed, ¹²for a twofold grief overtook them, and a groaning at the memory of what had occurred.

¹³When they learned that through their own punishments the righteous had received benefit, they perceived it was the Lord's doing.

¹⁴For though they had mockingly rejected him who long before had been cast out and exposed, at the end of the events they marvelled at him, when they felt thirst in a different way from the righteous.

Our author draws on the Biblical narrative, but in such a way as to be consistent with the Hellenist idea of an ordered universe subject to physical laws.

'They' are those freed from slavery in Egypt (see 10:15-21). 'A holy prophet' is Moses. The 'enemies'(verse 3) are the Amalekites (see Exodus 17:8-16), Sihon and Og (see Numbers 21) and the Midianites (see Numbers 31:1-12).

Verse 4 overlooks the complaining of the people that features in the Exodus account (see Exodus 17), and follows the Psalmist:

They cried to YHWH in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.

– Psalm 107:6

In verses 5-8 the author aims to demonstrate that Israel experienced the benefit of the very things that were used by God to punish Egypt. Water was turned to blood for the Egyptians (see Exodus 7:17) in punishment for 'the decree to kill the infants'(see Exodus 1:22). Through their experience of thirst the Israelites tasted something of the punishment experienced by the Egyptians (see verse 8), but God gave them water from the rock to save them.

The idea that the Israelites' experience of thirst was to test their commitment (compare 3:4-6, 9), a test given them by a loving father, is drawn from Deuteronomy 8:2-5.

By contrast the plagues that the Egyptians experienced in Egypt ('at home'), and the drowning in the Red Sea ('abroad') were punishments from a stern king'(verse 10). The 'twofold grief'(verse 12) experienced by the ungodly Egyptians consisted in the calamity that befell them, and the fact that this calamity brought deliverance to the Israelites. They came to recognise in this the work of YHWH (verse 14).

The point of verses 15-16 is that God's punishment is not intended to destroy but to help the foolish and the wicked to learn. The Egyptians were known for their association of birds and animals with the divine. God has the power to utterly destroy (verses 17-20), but he chooses to limit his punishment and to select it according to the crime. He therefore sent 'a multitude of creatures devoid of reasoning' (verse 15) to punish irrational behaviour: frogs (Exodus 8:2); gnats (Exodus 8:16); flies (Exodus 8:21). God's punishment is never arbitrary, but always follows the physical laws of nature by which he governs the universe.

¹⁵In return for their foolish and wicked thoughts, which led them astray to worship irrational serpents and worthless animals, you sent upon them a multitude of creatures devoid of reasoning to punish them, ¹⁶so that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which one sins.

¹⁷For your all-powerful hand, which created the world out of formless matter, did not lack the means to send upon them a multitude of bears, or bold lions, ¹⁸or newly-created unknown beasts full of rage, or such as breathe out fiery breath, or belch forth a thick pall of fumes, or flash terrible sparks from their eyes; ¹⁹not only could the harm they did destroy people, but the mere sight of them could kill by fright. ²⁰Even apart from these, people could fall at a single breath when pursued by justice and scattered by the breath of your power. But you have arranged all things by measure and number and weight.

²¹For it is always in your power to show great strength, and who can withstand the might of your arm?

²²In your sight the whole world is like a speck that tips the scales, like a drop of morning dew that falls on the ground.

God's all-embracing love

11:23 But you show mercy to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people's sins, so that they may repent. ²⁴For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it.

²⁵How could anything have endured if you had not willed it so? How would anything not called forth by you have been preserved?

²⁶You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you Lover of the soul.

12:1 For your incorruptible spirit is in all things.

²For this reason you correct little by little those who trespass, and you remind and admonish them by means of the very things in which they go wrong, so that they may be freed from wickedness and put their trust in you, O Lord.

These verses are among the most sublime words composed by our author. 'Show mercy' translates ἐλεέω. This is the only occurrence of the verb in this work. We have met the noun in 3:9; 4:15; 9:1 and 11:9, and it will occur again in 12:22; 15:1 and 16:10.

Power belongs to God, and steadfast love (ἔλεος) belongs to you, YHWH.

– Psalm 62:11-12

YHWH is good to all, and his compassion (οἰκτιρμός) is over all that he has made.

– Psalm 145:9

YHWH is patient with them and pours out his mercy (ἔλεος) upon them. He sees and recognizes that their end is miserable; therefore he grants them forgiveness all the more. The compassion of human beings is for their neighbours, but the compassion of YHWH is for every living thing. He rebukes and trains and teaches them, and turns them back, as a shepherd his flock.

– Sirach 18:11-13

On God's longing for our repentance see Ezekiel 33:11, and, in the Newer Testament see Romans 2:4 and 2Peter 3:9.

'Lover of the soul' (verse 26) translates φιλόψυχος, a word found in the Greek Bible only here.

Everything that lives does so by participating in the 'incorruptible spirit' of God (see 1:7). 'Incorruptible' translates ἄφθαρτος, a word found in the Septuagint only here and later in 18:4 where it describes the light of the Torah. For the noun see 2:23; 6:18-19.

In the Newer Testament it is found in the Appendix to Mark (16:8) where it is used to describe the proclamation of salvation. Paul uses it in relation to God (Romans 1:23), and to the risen body (1Corinthians 15:52). See also 1Peter 1:4; 1:23 and 3:4.

In verse 2 the author summarizes the central point he has been making in regard to God's merciful punishment of the Egyptians. It was in view of alerting them to their wicked ways, so as to free them from their sinful behaviour and lead them to put their trust in God. God is φιλόανθρωπος. He 'loves all things that exist' (11:24).

This passage parallels the previous one. We move now from Egypt to Canaan. The author seeks to justify the Israelite invasion of Canaan, and to assert that, just as God was just and lenient in regard to the Egyptians, so he was just and lenient towards the Canaanites.

The 'holy land' (verse 3) is, of course, Israel. The author's description of the depravity of the Canaanites (verses 4-6) is typical of the Bible record. Child-killing was practised in the rites of Molech (see Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10; Jeremiah 32:35; Psalm 106:37-38). There is no evidence of cannibalism being practised among the Canaanites (verse 5). If this is written in the first century AD, we may have here a criticism of Jews who had joined the Christian movement. If so, it is an early example of the non-Christian misunderstanding of the Christian Eucharist.

Canaan was YHWH's special possession. He had to empty it of the Canaanites and bring in the Israelites, described here in idealistic terms as 'a worthy migration of the servants of God' (verse 7).

As with Egypt, so here with the Canaanites, God could have annihilated them (verse 9). Instead, he sent in wasps (verse 8; see Exodus 23:28) to give them 'an opportunity to repent' (verse 10).

God did this, according to the author, even though he knew that they would never take up the offer of repentance. The Canaanites were innately evil, accursed from the beginning, and would never change.

God was acting, here as in Egypt, solely out of his compassion.

³Those who lived long ago in your holy land ⁴were hateful to you for their detestable practices, their works of sorcery and licentious rites, ⁵their merciless slaughter of children, and their sacrificial feasting on human flesh and blood. These initiates from the midst of a heathen cult, ⁶these parents who murder helpless souls, you willed to destroy by the hands of our ancestors,

⁷so that the land most precious of all to you might receive a worthy migration of the servants of God.

⁸But even these you spared, since they were mere mortals, when you sent wasps as forerunners of your army to destroy them little by little.

⁹It is not that you were unable to give the ungodly into the hands of the righteous in battle, or to destroy them at one blow by dread wild animals or your stern word.

¹⁰Judging them little by little you gave them an opportunity to repent, though you were not unaware that their origin was evil and their wickedness innate, and that their way of thinking would never change.

¹¹For they were an accursed race from the beginning, and it was not through fear of anyone that you left them unpunished for their sins.

God's all-embracing love

¹²For who will say, "What have you done?" or will resist your judgment? Who will accuse you for the destruction of nations that you made? Or who will come before you to plead as an advocate for the unrighteous?

¹³For neither is there any god besides you, whose care is for all people, to whom you should prove that you have not judged unjustly; ¹⁴nor can any king or monarch confront you about those whom you have punished.

¹⁵You are righteous and you rule all things righteously, deeming it alien to your power to condemn anyone who does not deserve to be punished.

¹⁶For your strength is the source of righteousness, and your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all.

¹⁷For you show your strength when people doubt the completeness of your power, and you rebuke any insolence among those who know it.

¹⁸Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with clemency, and with great forbearance you govern us; for you have power to act whenever you choose.

No one can accuse God of arbitrarily destroying the nation of Canaan that he himself had made. The land did not belong to them. It belongs to God, who had to purify the land which the Canaanites were polluting. The language of verse 12 has echoes of Job (see Job 9:12; 9:19).

It is the Canaanites' fault that they did not take the opportunity given them by God to repent (see verse 10). The Israelites cannot be accused of taking a land that belonged to others. God arranged for them to have it (so goes the argument) to make the land truly 'holy' (see verse 3).

Manuals on how to rule well, on the virtues required of a 'king', were popular in the Hellenist world. Here our author speaks of God, the universal King, who is just (verse 15; see 9:3). It follows that if anyone is punished by God they must have deserved it.

God is all-powerful, but always acts according to his nature, which is to be compassionate and to spare. His judgment are always given in clemency (*ἐπιείκεια*), and 'with great forbearance you govern us' (verse 18).

In the words of Ben Sira:

Mercy and wrath are with YHWH.
He is mighty to forgive—but he also
pours out wrath.

— Sirach 16:11

God gave the Egyptians and the Canaanites the opportunity to repent, even though he knew that they would not take up the offer. He did so in order to teach his people to copy God's example in their relations with others, and not forget that repentance is always available for the sinner, whether that sinner is a member of Israel, or belongs to any other race. It was because of their own free choice not to repent that the Egyptians and Canaanites were punished. As the prophets were always saying, it would be the same for the people of Israel if they refused to repent of their sins.

'Shows kingly goodwill' translates φιλάνθρωπος (see 1:6 where it is translated 'kindly', and 7:23).

The author does not attempt to offer a completely satisfying resolution to the relationship between divine will (which, as he sees it, ultimately controls everything that happens) and human freedom. He does, however, give it his best shot.

The resolution is found in the teaching of Jesus who taught and demonstrated by his own life that the power of God is not a power of control, but a power of love.

The author has been highlighting God's mercy, but without letting go the notion that God controls everything. It was Jesus who showed us to let go this notion of power. God does not control the world. God loves the world. It is we who bring on ourselves the effects of our sin.

We must go further than the author of this book but he does remind us of God's care for all, and he encourages us to see suffering as providing an opportunity for us to turn away from sin and back to our compassionate God.

¹⁹By acting in this way you have taught your people that the righteous person must be one who shows kingly goodwill towards others, and you have filled your children with good hope, because you give repentance for sins.

²⁰For if you punished with such great care and indulgence the enemies of your servants and those deserving of death, granting them time and opportunity to give up their wickedness,

²¹how conscientiously you have judged your children, to whose ancestors you gave oaths and covenants full of good promises!

²²While we, then, are thus chastened you scourge our enemies ten thousand times more, so that, when we judge, we may meditate upon your goodness, and when we are judged, we may expect mercy.

There is no avoiding divine justice

²³It is for this reason, too, that those who lived unrighteously, in a life of folly, you tormented with their own abominations. ²⁴For they went far astray on the paths of error, accepting as gods those animals that even their enemies despised; they were deluded like foolish infants.

²⁵Therefore, as though to children who cannot reason, you sent your judgment to mock them.

²⁶Those, however, who have not heeded the warning of mild rebukes will experience the deserved judgment of God.

²⁷For when in their suffering they became incensed at those creatures that they had thought to be gods, being punished by means of them, they saw and recognized as the true God the one whom they had before refused to know. Therefore the utmost condemnation came upon them.

The author returns to his theme of God's beginning his punishments lightly. If, however, these light punishments are ignored, we must expect to face 'the utmost condemnation' (verse 27).

The mocking judgments were the plagues of frogs, gnats and flies in Egypt (see 11:15-22) and the wasps of Canaan (see 12:8).

The Egyptians came to see that their animal gods were no gods at all, when they suffered because of these very irrational creatures. However, having refused to repent, they had to suffer the full condemnation that came upon them. Only then, when it was too late, did they recognise YHWH as the only true God.

The author has just been speaking of Egyptian animal worship. In chapters 13-15 he examines the whole question of worshipping that is not directed to the One, Living God, the Creator of the universe. He begins with a critique of how futile (μάταιος) it is to worship nature.

Paul uses the verb (ματαιιόω) when speaking of those who:

became futile in their thinking, their senseless minds darkened.

– Romans 1:21

‘The Existent One’ (τὸν ὄντα, verse 1) is a term used by Plato of the Form or Principle of the Deity. For our author it is the personal, transcendent Creator who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14): ‘I am the Existent One (Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὄν). ‘The Artificer’ (τεχνίτης) was applied to Wisdom in 8:6.

The author argues in verses 3-5 that from the beauty and power of creation we should be able to deduce the greater beauty and power of its ‘Author’ (γενεσιάρχης), its ‘Creator’ (γενεσιουργός). It is a matter of religious surrender, not abstract speculation.

This passage is a diatribe. The author has presented his thesis in verses 1-5. Then, in verses 6-7, comes an interjection from an imagined adversary who objects that perhaps nature worship is not that bad. God is immanent in creation. It is not surprising that people would be drawn to worship. Could not this indicate that they are seeking the sacred and responding to it?

In verses 8-9 the author dismisses the objection. People have no excuse for failing to penetrate more deeply into the beauty and power that they experience. They search out the Eon: the divine dynamic power that penetrates the cosmos. But they stop there, and so fail to attain to the One who, while immanent in creation, also transcends it. This is the One who holds everything in being, the Creator, in whose beauty and power creatures participate.

¹How naturally futile all who are ignorant of God, unable from the good things that are seen to recognise the Existing One, not recognising the Artificer, though gazing on what He has made. ²They supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world.

³If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the Author of beauty created them. ⁴If people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them. ⁵For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.

⁶Yet these people are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him. ⁷For while they live among his works, they keep searching, and they trust in what they see, because the things that are seen are beautiful.

⁸On the contrary, not even they are to be excused; ⁹for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the Eon, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?

¹⁰But miserable, with their hopes set on dead things, are those who give the name “gods” to the works of human hands, gold and silver fashioned with skill, and likenesses of animals, or a useless stone, the work of an ancient hand.

¹¹A skilled woodcutter may saw down a tree easy to handle and skillfully strip off all its bark, and then with pleasing workmanship make a useful vessel that serves life’s needs, ¹²and burn the cast-off pieces of his work to prepare his food, and eat his fill.

¹³But a cast-off piece from among them, useful for nothing, a stick crooked and full of knots, he takes and carves with care in his leisure, and shapes it with skill gained in idleness; he forms it in the likeness of a human being, ¹⁴or makes it in the likeness of some worthless animal, giving it a coat of red paint and colouring its surface red and covering every blemish in it with paint;

¹⁵then he makes a suitable niche for it, and sets it in the wall, and fastens it there with iron. ¹⁶He takes thought for it, so that it may not fall, because he knows that it cannot help itself, for it is only an image and has need of help.

¹⁷When he prays about possessions and his marriage and children, he is not ashamed to address a lifeless thing. ¹⁸For health he appeals to a thing that is weak; for life he prays to a thing that is dead; for aid he entreats a thing that is utterly inexperienced; for a prosperous journey, a thing that cannot take a step; ¹⁹for money-making and work and success with his hands he asks strength of a thing whose hands have no strength.

Even worse than worshipping nature is the worship of objects crafted by humans. The Psalmist, too, speaks of these as ‘dead things’ (Psalm 106:29). For ‘works of human hands’ see Deuteronomy 4:28 and Psalm 115:4. The ‘useless stone’ may refer to a meteorite, as probably in Acts 19:35, which speaks of a ‘statue that fell from heaven’.

Verses 11-19 are inspired by Isaiah 44:9-20. Both Isaiah and the author here are making fun of what to them was obviously stupid. We must consider, however, that they failed to understand the worship offered in these situations. Were the people actually worshipping the lifeless idol, or did they see the idol as a representation of the invisible deity that they were worshipping?

The presence of the cherubim in the sanctuary could have led others to believe (wrongly) that the Jews were worshipping the cherubim. The fact that in the northern kingdom the cherubim were replaced by bulls led the Jews (wrongly) to accuse their northern neighbour of indulging in the cult of the bulls.

There are people today who think (wrongly) that some Christians worship crucifixes and statues, whereas these are physical reminders of the presence of spiritual realities. They help focus the senses and stir the memory, and so help people pray to the transcendent God.

The polemic continues. A ship is made of wood. It has been made with skill, with 'wisdom'. It is no guarantee against shipwreck, but it is surely better to put one's trust in a wooden ship than in a wooden idol!

The author approves of seafaring in order to make a living. Ultimately it is God whose Wisdom inspires the building of the ship, and it is God who 'steers its course'. This is the only time 'Wisdom' is mentioned in chapters 11-19.

It is to God that people should pray, not to a piece of wood more fragile than the wooden ship. The author follows Sirach 23:1 in calling God 'Father'. The Greeks, too, addressed Zeus as 'Father'.

'Providence' (πρόνοια) is a word borrowed from the Stoics (see also 17:2). For the verb see 6:7.

Verses 6-7 refers to the primeval era and to Noah, described here as 'the hope of the world', and the ark (see Genesis 6-9). There is no precedent in the Septuagint for calling the ark a 'raft' (σχεδία). The author is alluding to the raft on which Odysseus escaped from Calypso.

In the Biblical narrative Goliath was described as being a 'descendant of the giants' (see 2 Samuel 21:20; 1 Chronicles 20:6). On giants see also Judith 16:6 and Sirach 16:7; 47:4.

Verse 7 was quoted by the Church fathers in relation to the cross.

¹Again, one preparing to sail and about to voyage over raging waves calls upon a piece of wood more fragile than the ship that carries him.

²For it was desire for gain that planned that vessel, and Wisdom was the Artificer who built it; ³but it is your providence, O Father, that steers its course, because you have given it a path in the sea, and a safe way through the waves, ⁴showing that you can save from every danger, so that even a person who lacks skill may put to sea. ⁵It is your will that works of your wisdom should not be without effect; therefore people trust their lives even to the smallest piece of wood, and passing through the billows on a raft they come safely to land.

⁶For even in the beginning, when arrogant giants were perishing, the hope of the world took refuge on a raft, and guided by your hand left to the world the seed of a new generation. ⁷For blessed is the wood by which righteousness comes.

⁸But the idol made with hands is accursed, and so is the one who made it – he for having made it, and the perishable thing because it was named a god.

⁹For equally hateful to God are the ungodly and their ungodliness; ¹⁰for what was done will be punished together with the one who did it.

¹¹Therefore there will be a visitation also upon the heathen idols, because, though part of what God created, they became an abomination, snares for human souls and a trap for the feet of the foolish.

¹²For the invention of idols is the beginning of fornication, and discovering them is the life's ruin.

¹³They did not exist from the beginning, nor will they exist forever. ¹⁴They entered the world through the empty illusions of men, and therefore their speedy end has been planned.

¹⁵A father, consumed with grief at an untimely bereavement, made an image of his child, who had been suddenly taken from him; he now honoured as a god what was once a human corpse, and handed on to his dependents secret rites and initiations. ¹⁶Then the ungodly custom, grown strong with time, was maintained as a law, and at the command of monarchs carved images came to be worshipped.

¹⁷When people could not honour monarchs in their presence, since they lived at a distance, they imagined their appearance far away, and made a visible image of the king whom they honoured, so that by their zeal they might flatter the absent one as though present. ¹⁸Then the ambition of the artisan impelled even those who did not know the king to intensify their cult.

¹⁹For he, perhaps wishing to please his ruler, skillfully forced the likeness to take more beautiful form, ²⁰and the multitude, attracted by the charm of his work, now regarded as an object of worship the one whom shortly before they had honoured as a human being.

²¹And this became a hidden trap for humankind, because people, in bondage to misfortune or to royal authority, bestowed on objects of stone or wood the name that ought not to be shared.

In verses 12-31, the author claims that idols arose either from people in their grief trying to preserve and honour a dead loved one (verses 15-16), or from images made to flatter those in power, which subsequently became objects of divine worship (verses 17-20).

The connection between idol worship and 'fornication' (verse 12; *πορνεία*) follows from the sexual licence associated with some pagan cults.

'Empty illusions' (verse 14; *κενοδοξία*) is an Epicurean term (see also Paul's use of the term in Philippians 2:3).

'Cult' in verse 18 translates *θησκαία* (see also 14:27; see Colossians 2:18). It is found in inscriptions of the Roman period, and is used in the sense of 'religion' in the Newer Testament (see Acts 26:5 and James 1:26-27).

In verse 19 our author is speaking against the abuses in the cult of rulers. 'Object of worship' in verse 20 translates *σέβασμα* (see also 15:17). It is used in the Newer Testament in 2Thessalonians 2:4 and Acts 17:23.

The name 'God' should be used only of the living and true God, YHWH.

The failure to know the true God leads to chaos in human affairs, and people have the hide to call this chaos ‘peace’ (εἰρήνη; verse 22; see 3:3). We recall the words of Jesus:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.

– John 14:27

On the ritual murder of children (verse 23) see 11:7 and 12:5. ‘Secret mysteries’ (verse 23) translates κρύφια μυστήρια (for ‘mystery’ see 2:22; 6:22; 14:15). Paul uses the term 21 times.

For the catalogue of crimes listed in verses 25-26 compare Galatians 5:19-21; Romans 1:29-31; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; Mark 7:21 and Matthew 15:19.

In verse 26 our author is speaking against the abuses in some of the mystery cults. ‘Defiling’ translates μιασμός. In the Septuagint it is found only here and in 1 Maccabees 4:43. It is likely that the ‘sexual perversion’ (verse 26) the author has in mind is the same as when Paul speaks of exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural (see Romans 1:26).

In verse 27 the author blames every evil on false worship. If our ‘god’ is wrong, everything goes wrong.

People are foolish to think that it doesn’t matter what they worship. It leads to dreadful behaviour (verses 28-29), which must and will be punished (verses 30-31).

²²It was not enough for them to err about the knowledge of God, but though living in great strife due to ignorance, they call such great evils peace.

²³For whether they kill children in their initiations, or celebrate secret mysteries, or hold frenzied revels with strange customs, ²⁴they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure, but they either treacherously kill one another, or grieve one another by adultery, ²⁵and all is confusion – blood and murder, theft and deceit, corruption, treachery, tumult, perjury, agitation of decent men, ²⁶ingratitude, defiling of souls, sexual perversion, disorder in marriages, adultery, and debauchery.

²⁷For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning, cause, and end of every evil.

²⁸For their worshippers either make merry to the point of madness, or prophesy lies, or live unrighteously, or readily commit perjury. ²⁹Placing their trust in lifeless idols they swear wicked oaths and expect to suffer no harm.

³⁰But just penalties will overtake them on two counts: because they thought wrongly about God in devoting themselves to idols, and because in their contempt for religion swore deceitful lies. ³¹For it is not the power of the things by which people swear, but the just penalty for those who sin, that always pursues the transgression of the unrighteous.

The Jews have escaped the temptation to idolatry

¹But you, our God, are kind and true, long-suffering, and governing all things with mercy.

²For even if we sin we are yours, knowing your power; but we will not sin, because we know that you acknowledge us as yours. ³For to know you is complete justice, and to be aware of your power is the root of immortality.

⁴For neither has the fraudulent intent of human art misled us, nor the fruitless toil of painters, a figure stained with varied colours, ⁵whose appearance arouses yearning in fools, so that they desire the lifeless form of a dead image.

⁶Lovers of evil things and fit for such objects of hope are those who either make or desire or worship them.

‘Kind’ translates *χρηστός*, a word found 13 times in the psalms as a quality of God. ‘True’ translates *ἀληθής* (see 12:27). ‘Long-suffering’ translates *μακρόθυμος* (‘slow to anger’; passionately offering love even when others resist or are slow to accept it). ‘Mercy’ translates *ἔλεος*. All except *χρηστός* are found in the classical text of Exodus and repeated throughout the Bible as qualities of God.

YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

– Exodus 34:6

The Exodus text continues with Moses’ prayer:

If now I have found favour in your sight, YHWH, I pray, go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.

– Exodus 34:9

It is in this context that the author can say ‘we are yours’(verse 2).

For the link in verse 3 between justice and immortality see 1:15.

In verse 4 the author is confident that the Jews have learned their lesson, and that all tendency to idolatry has been eradicated (compare Judith 8:18). The language of verses 4-5 echoes that of 1:3-4.

Verses 7-8 describe the work of a potter who moulds ‘a futile god’ out of clay, not considering that he himself is living on borrowed time. Plato imagined the gods forming human bodies out of earth, air, fire and water, knowing that these elements were on loan and had to be returned to the cosmos.

⁷A potter kneads the soft earth and laboriously moulds each vessel for our service, fashioning out of the same clay both the vessels that serve clean uses and those for contrary uses, all alike; but what shall be the use of each of them the worker in clay decides. ⁸With misspent toil, these workers form a futile god from the same clay – these mortals who were made of earth a short time before and after a little while go to the earth from which all mortals are taken, when the life that was lent them is demanded back.

⁹But the workers are not concerned that they are destined to die or that their life is brief, but they compete with workers in gold and silver, and imitate workers in copper; and they count it a glorious thing to mould counterfeit gods.

‘Their heart is ashes’ appears to be based on a mistranslation of Isaiah 44:20. Speaking of an idol makers, he says:

He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?”

In verse 11 our author speaks of the πνευμα ζωτικόν, an expression taken from the physicians of Alexandria, rather than the πνοή ζωής of Genesis 2:7.

¹⁰Their heart is ashes, their hope is cheaper than dirt, and their lives are of less worth than clay, ¹¹because they failed to know the one who formed them and inspired them with active souls, breathing a living spirit into them. ¹²They considered existence an idle game, and life a festival held for profit, for they say one must get money however one can, even by base means. ¹³For these, more than all others, know that they sin when they make from earthy matter fragile vessels and carved images.

¹⁴But most foolish of all, and more miserable than blind infants, are the enemies who oppressed your people. ¹⁵For they thought that all their heathen idols were gods, though these have neither the use of their eyes to see with, nor nostrils with which to draw breath, nor ears with which to hear, nor fingers to feel with, and their feet are of no use for walking. ¹⁶For a human being made them, and one whose spirit is borrowed formed them; for none can form gods that are like themselves. ¹⁷People are mortal, and what they make with lawless hands is lifeless; for they are better than the objects they worship, since they have life, something the idols never had. ¹⁸Moreover, they worship even the most hateful animals, which are worse than all others when judged by their lack of intelligence. ¹⁹Even as animals they are not so beautiful in appearance that one would desire them. They have escaped both the praise of God and his blessing.

^{16:1}Therefore those people were deservedly punished through such creatures, and were tormented by swarms of animals. ²Instead of this punishment you showed kindness to your people, and you prepared quails to eat, a delicacy to satisfy their fierce craving; ³in order that those people, when they desired food, might lose the least remnant of appetite because of the odious creatures sent to them, while your people, after suffering want a short time, might partake of delicacies. ⁴For it was necessary that upon those oppressors inescapable want should come, while to these others it was merely shown how their enemies were being tormented.

Earlier he spoke of them as ‘deceived like foolish infants’ (12:24).

Verse 15 echoes the Psalmist:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats. Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.

– Psalm 115:4-8 (also 135:15-18)

In chapters 16-19, as in 11:1-14, our author draws on the Biblical narrative, but in such a way as to be consistent with the Hellenist idea of an ordered universe subject to physical laws. The contrast here between what happened to the Egyptians and what happened to the Israelites echoes the earlier antithesis of 11:1-14. In both comparisons he omits any mention of the people’s murmuring or of God’s anger. Here all is positive, with the focus on God’s ‘kindness’ (‘doing good’; εὐεργετέω see 3:5; 11:5; 11:13).

The description of divine justice in verses 1-2 echoes 3:4-5.

For the story of God feeding his people with quails see Exodus 16:9-13; Numbers 11:10-32; Psalm 78:26-29 and Psalm 105:40.

The reference here is to Numbers 21:4-9.

In verse 7 the author is careful to avoid any suggestion of magic. It was not the bronze serpent that brought salvation, it was God, the Saviour (σωτήρ) of all.

For the third time (see 11:1-14 and 16:1-4) the author contrasts what happened to the Egyptians with what happened to the Israelites.

In verse 7 God is proclaimed the Saviour. Here in verse 12 he is the One who heals (ἰάομαι). Compare the Psalmist:

He sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.

– Psalm 107:20

Verse 13 is not speaking of the resurrection of the body – a notion that is not found anywhere in this book (compare 1Samuel 2:6 and Tobit 13:2). Rather he is saying that God restores to health people who appeared to be dying.

We cannot return the divine breath to the dead body or bring a soul up from Hades. The language here echoes 2:1.

⁵For when the terrible rage of wild animals came upon your people and they were being destroyed by the bites of writhing serpents, your wrath did not continue to the end; ⁶they were troubled for a little while as a warning, and received a token of salvation to remind them of your law's command.

⁷For the one who turned toward it was saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by you, the Saviour of all.

⁸And by this also you convinced our enemies that it is you who deliver from every evil. ⁹For they were killed by the bites of locusts and flies, and no healing was found for them, because they deserved to be punished by such things.

¹⁰But your children were not conquered even by the fangs of venomous serpents, for your mercy came to their help and healed them.

¹¹It was to remind them of your oracles they were bitten, and then were quickly delivered, so that they would not fall into deep forgetfulness and become complacent through your kindness.

¹²For neither herb nor poultice cured them, but it was your word, O Lord, that heals all people.

¹³For you have power over life and death; you lead down to the gates of Hades and back.

¹⁴A person in wickedness kills another, but cannot bring back a spirit that has departed, nor release a soul that has been imprisoned.

A fourth contrast

¹⁵To escape from your hand is impossible; ¹⁶for the ungodly, refusing to know you, were scourged by the strength of your arm, pursued by unusual rains and hail and relentless storms, and utterly consumed by fire. ¹⁷For – most incredible of all – in water, which quenches all things, the fire had still greater effect, for the cosmic order champions the righteous. ¹⁸At one time the flame was restrained, so that it might not consume the creatures sent against the ungodly, but that seeing this they might know that they were being pursued by the judgment of God; ¹⁹and at another time even in the midst of water it burned more intensely than fire, to destroy the crops of the unrighteous land.

²⁰By contrast, you gave your people food of angels, and without their toil you supplied them from heaven with bread ready to eat, providing every pleasure and suited to every taste.

²¹For your sustenance manifested your sweetness toward your children; and the bread, ministering to the desire of the one who took it, was changed to suit everyone's liking.

²²Snow and ice withstood fire without melting, so that they might know that the crops of their enemies were being destroyed by the fire that blazed in the hail and flashed in the showers of rain; ²³whereas the fire, in order that the righteous might be fed, even forgot its native power.

²⁴For creation, serving you who made it, exerts itself to punish the unrighteous, and in kindness relaxes on behalf of those who trust in you.

In the Book of Exodus we read:

Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and YHWH sent thunder and hail, and fire came down on the earth. And YHWH rained hail on the land of Egypt; there was hail with fire flashing continually in the midst of it, such heavy hail as had never fallen in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. The hail struck down everything that was in the open field throughout all the land of Egypt, both human and animal; the hail also struck down all the plants of the field, and shattered every tree in the field. Only in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were, there was no hail.

– Exodus 9:23-26

In verse 17 the author sees the whole cosmic order as working for the righteous. This is a theme to which he returns (see 18:3-4; 19:6-13; 19:21).

For the fourth time the author contrasts God's dealings with the Egyptians and his dealings with the Israelites (see 11:1-14; 16:1-4; 16:5-14). He is speaking of the gift of manna in the desert (Exodus 16:13-26), called 'bread of angels' in Psalm 78:25. They could 'bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil' (Exodus 16:23).

The image of snow and ice (verse 22) draws on Exodus 16:14 which states that the manna 'was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.'

In verse 24 the author completes the thought expressed in verse 17.

Verse 26 restates the Deuteronomist's reflection on the story of the manna:

He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of YHWH.

– Deuteronomy 8:3

Exodus 16:21 speaks of the manna melting under the heat of the sun (see Exodus 16:21). The author draws the moral that we should rise before the sun to praise God.

Once the light and warmth of God shines upon it, the hope to which the ungrateful person clings will 'melt like wintry frost, and flow away like waste water.'

²⁵Therefore at that time also, changed into all forms, it served your all-nourishing bounty, according to the desire of those who had need, ²⁶so that your children, whom you loved, O Lord, might learn that it is not the production of crops that feeds humankind but that your word sustains those who trust in you.

²⁷For what was not destroyed by fire was melted when simply warmed by a fleeting ray of the sun, ²⁸to make it known that one must rise before the sun to give you thanks, and must pray to you at the dawning of the light; ²⁹for the hope of an ungrateful person will melt like wintry frost, and flow away like waste water.

Egypt plunged into darkness

¹Great are your judgments and difficult to explain; therefore uninstructed souls have gone astray.

²For though lawless people supposed that they held the holy nation in their power, they themselves lay as captives of darkness and prisoners of the long night, shut in under their roofs, exiles from eternal providence.

³Thinking that in their secret sins, cloaked by dark oblivion, they were scattered, terribly alarmed, and appalled by phantoms. ⁴For not even the inner chamber that held them protected them from fear, but terrifying sounds rang out around them, and dismal phantoms with gloomy faces appeared. ⁵No fire had enough power to give light, nor did the brilliant flames of the stars avail to illumine that hideous night. ⁶Nothing was shining through to them except a dreadful, self-kindled fire, and in terror they deemed the things that they saw to be worse than that the appearance that were no longer visible.

⁷The delusions of their magic art proved ineffectual, and their pretention to wisdom was contemptuously unmasked. ⁸For those who promised to drive off the fears and disorders of a sick soul were sick themselves with ridiculous fear. ⁹For even if nothing disturbing frightened them, they were scared by the passing of wild animals and the hissing of snakes ¹⁰and they perished in trembling fear, refusing so much as to look upon the dark haze from which there was no escape.

In this fifth contrast our author focuses on the ninth plague in which YHWH defeated the sun-god Amen-Ra, and Egypt was plunged in darkness for three days (Exodus 10:22-23). He uses all his rhetorical skill to paint a picture of the physical, psychological and spiritual terror experienced by the 'lawless' (verse 2) Egyptians.

The Egyptian oppressors sought to conceal their sins (their mystery rites, see 14:23) in darkness, and so were punished by being plunged into the darkness they had chosen.

Reference to their 'magic art' can be found in Exodus 7:11 and 8:14.

'Dark haze' translates ἀήρ ('air'). In context the air is darkened by the eclipse of the sun.

‘Conscience’ translates *συνείδησις*. In the Septuagint it is found only here and in Ecclesiastes 10:20. It was a term used by Philo and in the Newer Testament it is used by Paul 20 times.

The author claims that fear comes when we fail to apply our reason. Furthermore, in order to retain some hope for the future, people prefer not to look into the causes of their anxiety.

There is no life in Hades, and therefore no power (verse 14).

No occupation protects a person from plunging into death-like fear and anxiety. Even being a fugitive banished from one’s country does not put a person outside the power of the darkness that descends upon the sinner (verse 17).

The Egyptian oppressors alone were plunged in an all-pervading darkness. The rest of the world experienced the light of the sun (verses 20-21).

¹¹For wickedness is a cowardly thing, condemned by its own testimony; and when anguished by conscience its distress is amplified.

¹²For fear is nothing but a giving up of the helps that come from reason; ¹³and hope, defeated by this inward weakness, prefers ignorance of what causes the torment.

¹⁴But they, throughout a night which was really powerless since it came upon them from the recesses of powerless Hades, were caught up in a death-like sleep, ¹⁵at times driven by monstrous spectres, at times paralyzed by the betrayal of their own minds, when sudden and unexpected fear overwhelmed them.

¹⁶And whoever fell down there was kept shut up in a prison not made of iron. ¹⁷Whether farmer or shepherd or worker toiling in the wilderness, they were seized, and awaited the inescapable fate; for with one chain of darkness they all were bound.

¹⁸Whether it was a whistling wind, or a melodious sound of birds in wide-spreading branches, or the rhythm of violently rushing water, ¹⁹or the harsh crash of rocks hurled down, or the unseen running of leaping animals, or the roar of the most savage beasts, or an echo reverberating from a hollow in the mountains – it paralyzed them with terror. ²⁰For the whole world was illuminated with brilliant light, and went about its work unhindered;

²¹while over those people alone heavy night was spread, an image of the darkness that was destined to receive them; but still heavier than darkness were they to themselves.

Israel lives in the light

¹But for your holy ones there was very great light. Their enemies heard their voices but did not see their forms, and counted them happy for not having suffered, ²and were thankful that your holy ones, though previously wronged, were doing them no injury; and they begged the pardon of those who departed.

³In contrast you provided a flaming pillar of fire as a guide for your people's unknown journey, and a benign sun to accompany them on their glorious wandering.

⁴Their enemies deserved to be deprived of light and imprisoned in darkness, those who had kept your children imprisoned, through whom the imperishable light of the law was to be given to the world.

The people of Israel were in the light.

People could not see one another, and for three days they could not move from where they were; but all the Israelites had light where they lived.

– Exodus 10:23

Verses 1-2 go well beyond the Exodus narrative. 'Those who departed' (verse 2) were, of course, the Israelites (see Exodus 11:8; 22:33 and Psalm 105:38).

On the 'flaming pillar of fire' see Exodus 13:21. The Psalmist praises God:

The sun will not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

– Psalm 121:6

Once again, the author asserts that the punishment suffered by the Egyptians was a deserved one.

He concludes with a beautiful statement of the mission given by God to Israel: 'through whom the imperishable light of the law was to be given to the world' (compare Isaiah 2 and 42:1-6).

Our author wants to encourage his students to educate themselves in the best of the Hellenist culture in which they are living. It is for this that he keeps using the religious and philosophical language of Hellenism to express the essence of Judaism.

At the same time, as is clear from verse 4, he wants his students to see their Jewish heritage as a gift of divine Wisdom that surpasses anything that Greek thought has produced. It is their privilege and duty to bring the light of the Torah to mankind.

The sixth contrast is based on the final plague: the death of the firstborn in Egypt (Exodus 11 and 12:29).

The decree to kill the Israelite boys is narrated in Exodus 1:16. The child who was abandoned and saved is Moses (see Exodus 2:1-10).

God prepared the Israelites for this (see Exodus 6:6; 11:4). For the ancestors see Genesis 15:14.

Exodus 13:15 draws a connection between the killing of the firstborn of the Egyptians and the redemption of the firstborn of the Israelites.

Moses' request of the Pharaoh was to let the people go into the wilderness to sacrifice (see Exodus 3:18; 5:3, 8,17; 8:8, 25-29; 10:25). The sacrifice mentioned in verse 9 is the first Passover (Exodus 12:21).

'Divinity' (θεϊότης) is a word probably coined by Epicurus. It is found nowhere else in the Septuagint.

Verse 13 goes beyond the Biblical narrative. Pharaoh was told that Israel is 'God's son':

Say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says YHWH: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, "Let my son go that he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.'

– Exodus 4:22-23

Compare also the prophet Hosea:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

– Hosea 11:1

⁵When they had resolved to kill the infants of your holy ones – though one child had been abandoned and saved – you in punishment took away a multitude of their children; and you destroyed them all together by a mighty flood.

⁶That night was made known beforehand to our ancestors, so that they might rejoice in sure knowledge of the compacts in which they trusted. ⁷The deliverance of the righteous and the destruction of their enemies were expected by your people. ⁸For by the same means by which you punished our enemies you called us to yourself and glorified us.

⁹For in secret the holy children of good people offered sacrifices, and with one accord agreed to the law of the divinity, so that the saints would share alike the same things, both blessings and dangers; and already they were singing the praises of the ancestors.

¹⁰But the discordant cry of their enemies echoed back, and their piteous lament for their children was spread abroad. ¹¹The slave was punished with the same penalty as the master, and the commoner suffered the same loss as the king. ¹²United by a common death, all had corpses too many to count. For the living were not sufficient even to bury the dead, since in one instant their most valued children had been destroyed.

¹³For though they had disbelieved everything because of their magic arts, yet, when their firstborn were destroyed, they acknowledged your people to be God's son.

¹⁴While gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, ¹⁵your all-powerful Word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a relentless warrior ¹⁶carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command, stood and filled all things with death, touching heaven while standing on the earth.

¹⁷Then at once apparitions in dreadful dreams greatly troubled them, and unexpected fears assailed them; ¹⁸and one here and another there, hurled down half dead, made known why they were dying. ¹⁹For the dreams that disturbed them forewarned them of this, so that they might not perish without knowing why they suffered.

²⁰An experience of death touched also the righteous, and a mass slaughter took place in the desert, though the divine wrath did not long continue. ²¹For a blameless man was quick to act as their champion; he brought forward the shield of his ministry, prayer and propitiation by incense; he withstood the anger and put an end to the disaster, showing that it was you whom he served. ²²He overcame their distress not by strength of body, nor by force of arms, but by his word he subdued the avenger, appealing to the oaths and covenants given to our ancestors. ²³For when the dead had already fallen on one another in heaps, he intervened and held back the wrath, and cut off its line of advance toward the living. ²⁴On his long robe the whole world was depicted, and the glories of the ancestors were engraved on the four rows of stones, and your majesty was on the diadem upon his head.

²⁵To these the destroyer yielded, these he feared; for the mere taste of the wrath was enough.

There are striking similarities between the description here of God's Word and the author's earlier description of God's Wisdom.

Send her forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory send her.

– Wisdom 9:10

Both Word and Wisdom are all-powerful (see 7:23); both descend from the heavenly throne (see 9:4, 10, 17); and both carry out God's command (see 7:21 and 8:4).

The command referred to here is the final plague: the killing of the firstborn Egyptians.

The language of verses 15-16 echoes 5:18-21.

The mass slaughter of Israelites in the wilderness is narrated in Numbers 16:31-35. The 'blameless man' (verse 21) is the high priest, Aaron (see Numbers 16:47-50).

The Israelites were saved from total annihilation because of the commitment made to their ancestors by God.

The 'long robe' (verse 24) is that of the high priest (see Exodus 25:6; 28:4). The high priest's vestments are described in Exodus 28. Our author portrays the Jewish high priest as mediator of the entire universe.

The Israelites tasted the divine wrath. They knew that it mattered how they behaved. The warning was enough.

The seventh and final contrast is at the crossing of the Red Sea: the Egyptians were drowned and died, the Israelites passed through safely to a new life.

In the Book of Exodus we read:

The Egyptians urged the people to hasten their departure from the land, for they said, "We shall all be dead."

– Exodus 12:33

In verse 6 the author employs a philosophical principle used by the Greeks in order to make miracles more plausible. Some Greek philosophers maintained that the elements of nature are mutually interchangeable. It is possible, therefore, for water to change into dry land.

Verse 7 may be an allusion to the darkness over the deep in Genesis 1:2. The emergence of land from the water continues the creation account of Genesis (see Genesis 1:9).

Verses 10-12 reflect back on how God refashioned nature to care for his people Israel.

¹But the ungodly were hounded to the very end by pitiless anger, for God knew in advance what they were yet to do: ²how, though they themselves had permitted your people's departure, and urgently sending them out, they would change their minds and pursue them.

³While they were still engaged in mourning, and were lamenting at the graves of their dead, they reached another foolish decision, and pursued as fugitives those whom they had begged to leave.

⁴For the fate they deserved drew them on to this end, and made them forget what had happened, in order that they might fill up the punishment that their torments still lacked,

⁵and that your people might experience an incredible journey, but they themselves might meet a strange death.

⁶For the whole creation in its nature was fashioned anew, complying with your commands, so that your children might be kept unharmed. ⁷The cloud was seen overshadowing the camp, and dry land emerging where water had stood before, an unhindered way out of the Red Sea, and a grassy plain instead of the raging waves, ⁸where those protected by your hand passed through as one nation, after gazing on marvellous wonders. ⁹They were like grazing horses, they leaped like lambs, praising you, O Lord, their deliverer.

¹⁰They still recalled the events of their sojourn, how instead of producing animals the earth brought forth gnats, and instead of fish the river spewed out vast numbers of frogs.

¹¹Afterward they saw also a new kind of bird, when desire led them to ask for luxurious food; ¹²for, to give them relief, quails came up from the sea.

Egypt was more blameworthy than Sodom

¹³The punishments did not come upon the sinners without prior signs in the violence of thunder, for they justly suffered because of their wicked acts.

They practised such bitter hatred of strangers. ¹⁴Others refused to receive strangers when they came to them, but these made slaves of guests who were their benefactors.

¹⁵And not only so – indeed their final reckoning is yet to come – for the former received strangers with hostility, ¹⁶whereas the latter, having first received them with festal celebrations, afterward afflicted with terrible sufferings those who had already shared the same rights.

¹⁷They were stricken also with loss of sight – just as were those at the door of the righteous man – when, surrounded by an immense darkness, all of them tried to find the way through their own doors.

The author is drawing on the Psalmist:

When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

– Psalm 77:16-20

The author focuses on the bitter hatred the Egyptians showed to a people who were guests in their land. This enables him to compare the behaviour of the Egyptians with that of the people of Sodom. It is true that the people of Sodom failed in hospitality to the strangers who came to their city (see Genesis 19), but they did not make slaves of them (verse 14). ‘Benefactors’ is a reference to the services given to Egypt by Joseph (Genesis 41).

Furthermore the people of Sodom were hostile to the strangers from the outset. The people of Egypt welcomed the Israelites ‘with festal celebrations’. The reference is to Genesis 43:31-34. Indeed, they needed them. But then they turned on them and reduced them to slavery (verses 15-16).

For the rights initially granted by Egypt to the Israelites see Genesis 45:17-20.

The Egyptians were stricken with blindness at the Red Sea (see Exodus 14:20), as were the men of Sodom who were intending to abuse ‘the righteous man’, Lot (see Genesis 19:11).

The author returns to the notion touched on in verse 6. He seems to be espousing the Stoic theory that God created by bestowing a form on some sort of unformed matter, which means that miracles consist of giving another form, such that land animals can be transformed into sea creatures, and water can be transformed such that it does not extinguish fire, and fire can be transformed such that it does not destroy insects (see 16:17-22).

‘Heavenly’ in verse 21 translates ἄμβροσιός, a word not found elsewhere in the Septuagint. In Hellenist literature ‘ambrosia’ is the food of the gods.

Concluding doxologies are common in Jewish religious literature (see Psalm 150; Sirach 51:30).

¹⁸For the elements changed places with one another, as on a harp the notes vary the nature of the rhythm, while each note remains the same. This may be clearly inferred from observation of what took place. ¹⁹For land animals were transformed into water creatures, and creatures that swim moved to the land. ²⁰Fire even in water retained its normal power, and water forgot its fire-quenching nature. ²¹Conversely, flames did not consume the flesh of perishable creatures that walked among them, nor did they dissolve the easily melted ice-like heavenly food.

²²For in every way, O Lord, you exalted and glorified your people, and you have not neglected to help them at all times and in all places.

