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The Antithetical Pair “to punish” and “to benefit” (κολάζω and εὐεργετέω) in the Book of Wisdom

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1 The Use of the Words “to punish” and “to reward” in the Book of Wisdom

As is well known, the final chapters of the book of Wisdom are characterised by seven antitheses in which the author contrasts the punitive actions of God against the Egyptians with the benefits granted to the children of Israel. These antitheses are governed by an initial principle expounded in 11:5, immediately before the first antithesis (11:6–14): “that through which their enemies were punished (ἐκολάσθησαν), was for them a benefit (εὐεργετήθησαν) in their difficulties”. That is, God makes use of the same created realities both in order to punish the wicked and to save the just. The case of the Exodus is a proof of the principle.

This principle is repeated and closely examined in 11:15–16, a text which Maurice Gilbert has studied thoroughly¹. In this investigation, I intend to consider the antithetical pair of verbs present in 11:5, κολάζω and εὐεργετέω, which, in themselves, have not received great attention from the commentators². The vocabulary both of “punishing” and of “benefiting” is not rare in the book of Wisdom. Here, we are concerned only with those texts in which “punish” and “benefit” are found together. In particular, we shall be asking ourselves, within the frame of the whole book of Wisdom, what role the antithesis “punish”/“benefit” plays, and what is its religious and cultural background. We shall be referring, therefore, to Wis 3:4–5; 11:5.13; 16:2.9–11.24, the six texts in which κολάζω/κόλασις and εὐεργετέω/εὐεργεσία appear alongside each other.

The verb κολάζω (“to punish”) is very frequent in Wisdom: it occurs a good twelve times in 3:4; 11:5.8.16; 12:14.15.27; 14:10; 16:1.9; 18:11.22, to which we can add the substantive κόλασις (“punishment”) present in 11:13; 16:2.24; 19:4. These

1 Cf. GILBERT, “On est puni”, 183–191 (= ID., *La Sagesse de Salomon*, 231–241).

2 Cf. a very brief observation on this in ENGEL, *Das Buch der Weisheit*, 187.

two words are attested in the LXX outside the book of Wisdom, above all in those texts that are later and not translations, such as 1–4 Maccabees. In the book of Wisdom, the use of the two terms has always a theological value, with a decided eschatological flavour, as is the case, later, in the New Testament. The “punishing” is always seen as a work of God³. The verb *κολάζω* is normally used in the passive, except for 11:8 and 12:14. Objects of the divine punishment are the Egyptians (cf. 11:5.8.16; 12:27; 16:1.9; 18:11), idolatry (14:10), and the just person, but, in his case, only from the perspective of the wicked (3:4).

The vocabulary of “benefiting” is also not uncommon in our book: the verb *εὐεργετώ* appears in Wis 3:5; 11:5.13; 16:2, in all four cases in connection with the vocabulary of “punishing”. Also found are the substantives *εὐεργεσία* in 16:11.24 (again, in connection with “punishing”); *εὐεργετής* in 19:14, and, finally, the adjective *εὐεργετικός* in 7:23, within the list of attributes proper to wisdom. This group of words is poorly attested in the LXX (Wisdom, Esth add. 8:12c, some occurrences in the Psalms and in 2–4 Maccabees). Apart from a few exceptions (2 Macc 4:2; 9:26; 3 Macc 6:24; 4 Macc 8:6.17; Wis 19:14), these words are used with reference to God. In particular, the verb *εὐεργετέω* always has God for its subject (cf. Pss 12[13MT]:6; 56[57 MT]:3; 114 [116 MT]:7; 2 Macc 10:38; 4 Macc 8,6; Esth add. 8:12c [16:3]), as is the case also in the writings of Philo (cf. *infra*). Among the other Jewish authors writing in Greek, Josephus uses the vocabulary of “benefiting” very often, in a theological but also in a political sense⁴.

We observe immediately how in the book of Wisdom the use of the vocabulary of “benefiting” clearly acquires a polemical nuance, evident in a particular way in the texts of chapter 16: God is the only and true benefactor of humanity, in open contrast with the “benefactor” deities of the Graeco-Roman world –Asclepius and Isis in particular– and in a neat antithesis to the rulers and powerful of the earth to whom the epithet “benefactors” is also applied (cf. *infra*)⁵.

³ Cf. SCHNEIDER, *κολάζω*, κτλ, 815–818; for *ὁ κολάζων* in 18,22, cf. PRIOTTO, La prima Pasqua, 210–212.

⁴ Cf. RENGSTORF, A Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus, *sub voce*.

⁵ Cf. SPICQ, Notes, vol. 1, 307–313. For the links between Wis 16:2.11.24 and the Hellenistic religious world, cf. MANESCHG, Die Erzählung, espec. 186–187.

2 God Punishes and Provides Benefits (Wis 3:4–5; 11:5.13; 16:2.9–11.24)

The first text of Wisdom in which the vocabulary of “punishing” is joined to that of “benefiting” is found in the first part of the book, in a clearly eschatological context in relation to the death of the just (3:4–5). They “are in peace”; even if their death appeared as a punishment (ἐὰν κολασθῶσιν) in the eyes of others, “their hope is full of immortality”. In exchange for a brief period of correction (ὀλίγα παιδευθέντες), the just “will receive great benefits” (μεγάλα εὐεργετηθήσονται, 3:5a). The use of the passive (κολασθῶσιν, εὐεργετηθήσονται) refers to the action of God (the subject of the rest of 5b). The death of the just cannot, therefore, be considered as a kind of divine punishment but, paradoxically, it should be read as a benevolent act on God’s part: in fact, the just obtain immortality (4b), life with God (9b). The end of the just is not a calamity, but a favour which they receive from God.

After 3:4–5, the pair “punish”/“benefit” reappears only at the beginning of the third part of the book (chaps. 10–19) which, as is well known, continually recalls the initial section (chaps. 1–6). Our sage intends to base in history the eschatological gospel with which he opens his work: the very literary structure of the entire book of Wisdom is witness to this⁶. Introducing the seven antitheses with the already mentioned principle expressed in 11:5, our sage reminds us that the God of Israel is capable both of punishing the wicked and benefiting the just, and that he does this by making use of the same forces of his creation.

In confirmation of this idea, our pair of words returns for a third time precisely within the first antithesis (11:6–14): the water which changed into blood for the Egyptians (cf. Exod 7:14–24) is contrasted with the water which poured forth from the rock for the thirsty Israelites (cf. Exod 17:1–7). In v. 13, we read “indeed, when they (the Egyptians) heard that, through their own punishment (διὰ τῶν ἰδίων κολάσεως), they (the Israelites) had received benefit (εὐεργετούμενους), they perceived that it was from the Lord”. The subject of the whole verse is here represented by the Egyptians who become aware of the presence of God⁷ when they learn of what happened to the Israelites in the desert: they –the Israelites– had received benefit from God through the same element of water which, being changed into blood in the course of the first plague, had served to punish the

⁶ Cf. GILBERT, *The Last Pages*.

⁷ On this subject, cf. GILBERT, *La connaissance de Dieu*, 191–210 (ID., *La Sagesse de Salomon*, esp. 322–323).

Egyptians. It is interesting to observe how the theme of the punishment of the Egyptians in 11:8b, is linked to the antithetical one of the correction which God exercises with mercy in his dealings with the Israelites (ἐν ἐλεί παιδευόμενοι); for the Israelites, the vocabulary of punishment is thus transformed into that of “correction” (cf. also, 11:10; 12:2.26; 16:6); the Egyptians are “punished”, while the Israelites are only “corrected” (cf., *infra*, with regard to 2 Macc 6:12–17).

After the two extensive digressions on the philanthropy of God (11:15–12:17) and on idolatry (chaps. 13–15), our pair of words returns together, for the fourth time, immediately at the beginning of the second antithesis (16:1–4), in 16:2, just after the passage on Egyptian zoology (15:14–19), which concludes the reflection on idolatry. In the same chapter 16, it is useful to recall that the vocabulary of “benefiting” also serves to create a literary link between the three antitheses contained in it (cf. 16:2.11.24).

In 16:2, we read that “instead of this punishment (ἀνθ’ ἧς κολάσεως), you did good (εὐεργετήσας) to your people; when their appetite desired a taste out of the ordinary, you provided quails as food...”. While the Egyptians were punished with the plague of frogs (cf. Exod 7:25–8:11, but also 8:12–15, the gnats; 8:16–28, the flies), it was quails that rained on the Israelites (cf. Exod 16:13; Num 11:31). We are thus reminded of the basic theme of the seven antitheses and the principle expounded in 11:5: God punishes the wicked and rewards the just, utilising the same created realities for the one and for the other. The digression on divine “philanthropy” (11:15–12:27) has shown us, however, that the punitive action of God is always in view of conversion (εἰς μετάνοιαν, 11:23), even when the ungodly are involved, and is always subordinate to his love and mercy towards every creature (12:2).

In the third antithesis (16:5–14), the theme of punishment appears in v. 9: the Egyptians were worthy of being punished (κολασθῆναι) with the plague of the locusts and flies while the Israelites (“your sons”; 16:10) were preserved from the bites of the serpents in the desert (cf. Num 21:4–9) so that “they might not remain excluded from your benevolent action (τῆς σῆς εὐεργεσίας)” (v. 11); God’s benefits are bound up with his mercy (16:10b) and with his word (16:12b). In this case too, the “punishing” concerns the Egyptians, the “benefiting”, instead, only Israel.

In 16:24, our pair of words returns for the sixth and last time in the book. We find ourselves at the heart of the fourth antithesis (16:15–29), in which the gift of the manna made to Israel is contrasted with the hail which fell on Egypt. The text of 16:24 appears particularly interesting because it constitutes a further repetition of the principles already expressed in 11:5.15–16: “indeed, the creation, obeying you who made it, exerts itself to punish (ἐπιτείνεται εἰς κόλασιν) the unrighteous and mitigates itself for the benefit (ἀνιέται εἰς εὐεργεσίαν) of those who trust in you”.

It has long been noted that the vocabulary of this text has clearly been influenced by Stoicism. In fact, in Stoic cosmology, the expression ἐπιτείνεται καὶ ἀνίεται, two verbs which literally ought to refer to the bow string (“it tenses and it relaxes”), relates to the idea of the cohesion of the elements and the harmony of the universe. However, the commentaries do not linger much over the pair “punishment”/“benefit”⁸. In fact, v. 24 remains somewhat vague and does not mean to propound particular philosophical theories, but rather to reaffirm the principle already enunciated right at the beginning of the book (1:14; 5:17–20) and taken up again precisely in 11:5.15–16: namely, that the creation is bearer of salvation for the just, as well as of punishment for the wicked.

The idea that creation itself is an instrument of salvation is peculiar to the book of Wisdom and constitutes one of its most original theological features⁹. Not so, however, the “punishing”/“benefiting” antithesis which, in the six texts which we have considered, appears to be at the root of such a conception. A brief examination of the combined use of the vocabulary of “punishment” and “benefit” in the Hellenistic world and in the Jewish literature written in Greek will help us better to understand the texts of Wisdom with which we are concerned.

3 The Influence of the Hellenistic World: Philosophy and the Treatises on Kingship

In classical Greek, the idea of a God who punishes humanity is very widespread. In Stoicism, however, there developed the conviction that God is good and is the only cause of good. The idea is already clearly present in Platonic philosophy: the essence of God is only the good (Tim. 29e-30a) and it cannot be accepted that God is ever the cause of evils (Resp. II, 379de); with regard to this idea the text from the Timaeus is perhaps fundamental.

In the words of Plutarch, the gods are “providing benefits and philanthropic” (εὐεργετικούς καὶ φιλανθρώπους)¹⁰, and yet they are not indifferent to evils. Recording an opinion of Chrysippus, the same Plutarch recalls that God “punishes wickedness (κολάζειν τὴν κακίαν)” and that evils are assigned by Zeus “according

⁸ Cf., in particular, LARCHER, *Le livre de la Sagesse*, 934–936; WINSTON, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 300, and the texts cited there.

⁹ Cf. VOGELS, *The God Who Creates*.

¹⁰ SVF II, 323 frag. 1115.

to reason or to punish or as part of the working of the universal economy”¹¹. Thus, in every case, evil occurs in a providential order willed by a God who by nature is the highest good: “And what reason have the Gods for doing deeds of kindness? It is their nature. One who thinks that they are unwilling to do harm, is wrong; they cannot do harm. They cannot receive or inflict injury” (*Quae causa est dis benefacendi? Natura. Errat si quis illos putat nocere nolle: non possunt. Nec accipere iniuriam quaeunt nec facere*)¹².

The idea of a God who is primarily “benefactor” rather than “punisher”, is frequent also in the mystery cults. Diodorus Siculus describes Isis as “benefactress” (εὐεργετικόν; cf. I, XXV, 2s); the epithet σωτήρ καὶ εὐεργέτης appears in an inscription from the time of Augustus dedicated to Asclepius and set up in the temple of Philae¹³.

The epithet σωτήρ καὶ εὐεργέτης leads us to a new, possible background against which the author of *Wisdom* is moving. In fact, with this expression, it was not only the divinity that was being characterised but, particularly, the earthly monarch. Both in the Ptolemaic and in the Roman periods, the idea was widespread that the king was “benefactor” (cf. Luke 22:25) and, for his subjects, incarnated the very action of God. The pair σωτήρ καὶ εὐεργέτης was much used in connection with the Ptolemaic monarchy and, subsequently, by the Emperor Augustus and his successors¹⁴.

It is well known that, in composing the royal-Solomonic fiction which characterises *Wisdom* 7–9, our sage makes use of the neo-Pythagorean treatises on kingship¹⁵. Especially in the treatise on kingship attributed to Diotogenes, the Stoic-Platonic idea of a “benefactor” God is translated into that of a monarch who, incarnating on earth the universal law and the action of God, becomes, in his turn, a “benefactor”, performing only the good in his relations with his subjects.

11 SVF II, 338 frag. 1176.

12 SENECA, Ep. 95, 47. Cf. also, PHILO, Prov. II, 82. For this subject within Stoic philosophy, cf. POHLENZ, *Die Stoa*, vol. 1, 98–101; vol. 2, 55–56.

13 DITTENBERGER, *Oriens Graeci Inscriptiones*, vol. 2, 657,1; year 13/12 B.C. Cf. MANESCHG, *Die Erzählung*, 186–187.

14 Cf. the pioneering study by SKARD, *Zwei religiös-politische Begriffe*, 6–66; cf. also, NOCK, *Soter and Euergetes*; PASSONI DELL’ACQUA, *Euergetes*. For Augustus styled as “benefactor”, cf. also, PHILO, Legat. 149: Augustus is ὁ πρῶτος καὶ μέγιστος καὶ κοινὸς εὐεργετής; cf. also, note 5.

15 For a more extensive consideration and a richer bibliography on these treatises and for the problem of their dating, cf. TERMINI, *Dal Sinai alla creazione*, in particular, 167, note 29. Termini suggests a date for these treatises of around the III-II centuries BC. Cf. also, SQUILLONI, *Il significato etico-politico*. For the relationship of these treatises with the *Book of Wisdom*, cf. GILBERT, *La vostra sovranità viene dal Signore*, esp. 125–127; cf. also LARCHER, *Etudes*, 219.

Among the various recommendations addressed to the king in this treatise, the one relating to keeping oneself from covetousness lays down that “the king must possess the wealth necessary to benefit (εὐεργετεῖν) his friends”¹⁶. A little later, εὐεργεσία is registered by Diotogenes as one of the principal qualities of the king, together with the rapidity which he ought to display in knowing how to punish the wicked (κολάσιος). In this knowing how to connect the capacity of punishing with that of benefiting his subjects, the king shows himself to be θεόμιμος, imitator of the divinity. He cannot, therefore act on the basis of the fear of punishments – though this is necessary at times – but on the basis of benevolence, precisely as the divinity acts¹⁷.

4 Hellenistic Judaism: 2 and 4 Maccabees and Aristeas

The influence of these Hellenistic concepts appears clearly in two Jewish authors who wrote in Greek, Aristeas and Philo, but also in the only two texts of the LXX (other than those already seen in Wisdom) in which the vocabulary of “punishing” and of “benefiting” is found together; both texts are late and are not translations.

In 2 Macc 6:12–17, the author of the book provides an extensive theological reflection concerning the evils that have happened to Israel. Where Israel is concerned, God does not allow the wicked to go unpunished, but strikes them suddenly with punishments. That is a sign of his great benevolence (μεγάλης εὐεργεσίας, v. 13). With the other nations, however, God waits for them to reach the fullness of their sins in order to punish them (κολάσαι, v. 14). With his people, then, God acts in a merciful way, as a good sovereign, as a εὐεργέτης (cf. 2 Macc 4:2) who performs the good for his people, and, if he has to punish them, he does it, in fact, to correct and educate them (πρὸς παιδείαν, 2 Macc 6:12.16).

In 4 Macc 8:6, within the conversation which the tyrant holds with the seven brothers who are going to be martyred by him, Antiochus, the persecutor king, declares: “just as I am able to punish (κολάζειν) those who disobey my orders, so am I able to benefit (εὐεργετεῖν) those who obey me”. Here, we have a clear reflection of the Hellenistic concept of kingship discussed above.

¹⁶ Cf. DIOTOGENES, 265,20–21, in DELATTE, *Les Traités de la Royauté*, 39–40.

¹⁷ DIOTOGENES, 267,8 ff., in DELATTE, *Les Traités de la Royauté*, 42; cf. also, 214–216.

The Letter of Aristeas appears particularly interesting in this regard. On two occasions, the author reflects on this aspect of royal conduct, linking it closely in both cases with the action of God. In Arist. 188, magnanimity (μακροθυμία) is contrasted with punishing (κολάζειν); the assumption of such a benevolent attitude on the part of the sovereign leads the wicked to conversion (εἰς μετάνοιαν). We shall find a similar idea in Wis 11:23, in connection with the merciful action of God. A little later, in Arist. 190, it is precisely the activity of God, the benefactor of humanity, which becomes the model of such a way of acting for the good ruler: ὁ θεὸς εὐεργετεῖ τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένος.

An analogous idea is expressed in Arist. 208: the king must be “philanthropic” (φιλόανθρωπος). In fact, he must not punish thoughtlessly (οὔτε εὐκόπως δεῖ κολάζειν), but has to imitate the divine mercy. On the part of the sovereign, therefore, it is a question of acting like God who benefits the whole of the cosmos (ὡς γὰρ θεὸς εὐεργετεῖ τὸν ὅλον κόσμον).

In Aristeas, the influence of the neo-Pythagorean treatises on kingship clearly intersects with the Stoic-derived concept of a God who can only will the good. We observe how, compared with the book of Wisdom, Aristeas places most of his emphasis on the divine benefits, almost excluding or at least minimising the idea of punishment. For the author of the Letter, punishment, whether in the divine or in the human sphere, is always tempered because God is a benevolent and generous benefactor.

5 Philo of Alexandria

It is in Philo, however, that our pair of words emerges in texts of particular interest, texts that are in many respects close to the book of Wisdom. As for Aristeas, so too for Philo, the wordpair “punish”/“benefit” describes primarily the conduct of the good ruler, who honours those who do good (τοὺς εὐεργέτας) and punishes (τὸ κολάζειν) the guilty (Flacc. 81).

Yet, Philo’s interest centres rather on the disposition of God. In Deus 77–81, Philo describes the disposition of God who moderates his power on account of human weakness. The text of Deus 80 is notable in this connection: because of the natural weakness (φυσικὴν ἀσθένειαν) of human beings, God “does not wish to hand out either his benefits or his punishment as he actually can” (οὔτε εὐεργετεῖν οὔτε κολάζειν ὡς δύναται βούλεται), but “in the measure in which he sees that those who must be subject to one part or the other of his power are able to receive it”. Not long before (§ 76), Philo had just affirmed that God offers his mercy to human beings, something from which even the unworthy can benefit

(εἰς εὐεργεσίαν): “he is not content to exercise his mercy after having judged, but he judges having already had mercy. In fact, with him, mercy is older than judgement (πρεσβύτερος γὰρ δίκης ὁ ἦλεος), because he knows who deserves to be punished (τὸν κολάσεως ἄξιον) before judging and not after”. Philo’s discourse on God, which comes in this section of the book, appears to be inserted within a more extensive treatment of the powers of God (cf. *infra*). Philo emphasises the fact that God measures his actions and, therefore, his gifts, but also his punishment, to the nature of the human recipient, whether for good or ill.

In Sacr. 131.133, our pair of words returns more directly in relation to the doctrine of the divine Powers (δυνάμεις). The legislative power of God –one of the principal divine powers according to Philo– is, essentially, divided into two: “on the one hand, it aims at rewarding (εἰς εὐεργεσίαν) those who act rightly, on the other hand, at punishing (εἰς κολάσιν) those who sin” (131). The idea of a benevolent power (εὐεργέτης) alongside a punitive one (κολαστήριος) is taken up again by Philo, in Abr. 145, in connection with the episode of Sodom: salvation comes to human beings from the first power, destruction, however, from the other one. The whole section of Abr. 133–146 allows the Alexandrian philosopher to exclude the possibility that God can will evil; he is always σωτήρ καὶ φιλόανθρωπος (137), but also able to punish. It is to this model of God that kings must conform in their own governance (144).

In comparison to Aristees, Philo does not restrict himself to underlining the divine benefits; in fact, they are equally balanced with God’s punitive disposition. We are, thus, closer to the ideas contained in the book of Wisdom which, however, does not show any awareness of the theory of the divine Powers as expounded by Philo¹⁸. And yet, for Philo too, there exists a certain inclination of God towards “benefiting”. In Mut. 129, we read that, even if he has to punish (κολάζεσθαι) the one who has committed injustice, the sovereign of the universe allows the wicked person to have intercessors so that his punishment may be moderated; in fact, “to do the good is proper to God” (θεοῦ δὲ τὸ εὐεργετεῖν ἴδιον). This idea is also implicit in the whole digression in Wis 11:15–12:27. In Somn. I, 143, Philo adds, however, that God extends both his punishments (κολάσεις) and his benefits (εὐεργεσίας) not by his own hand, but by the hand of his ministers. Quoting Exod 20:19, Philo declares that God does not act directly where human beings are concerned but in a mediated way. In the book of Wisdom, God’s actions occur by means of a mediator: the cosmos. But Philo’s ministers are personal *agents*, whereas Wisdom’s cosmos is an *instrument*.

18 Cf. TERMINI, *Le potenze di Dio*, 66–69.

Again, in Fug. 65–66 Philo confirms that it is fitting for God only to do the good (εὐεργεσίας); punishment (τὸ κολάζειν) reaches the wicked by means of others, chosen by God. We note, then, that in Philo the term κολαστήριος (absent in Wisdom) is for the most part restricted to the powers rather than attributed directly to God (Post. 20; Gig. 47; Ebr. 32; Her. 166; Abr. 145; Spec. I, 307). In fact, Philo hesitates to attribute punishment directly to God since God cannot be considered responsible for evil; chastisement is sometimes seen as a preventive, as a warning directed at sinners. In the text of Conf. 171, Philo creates a play on words between κόλασις and κώλυσις (“warning”). In Fug. 74, he seeks to justify the punitive action of Providence declaring that it “is a good thing which is imitating the evil”.

There is, therefore, something of a tension in the thought of Philo which is not altogether resolved. The idea that it is fitting for God only to do the good is fundamental for him, and is bound up, as in Wisdom (cf. the principle laid down in 12:16), with a firm faith in the divine omnipotence (cf. Opif. 46; Abr. 175; Mos. I, 94.174; Spec. I, 282; IV, 127)¹⁹. Philo’s effort seems to be that of reconciling two opposed visions of God’s activity: the idea, originating in a Stoic-Hellenistic context, of a God who only does the good, and the, typically biblical, idea of a God who punishes moral evil.

Both Philo and the book of Wisdom are convinced that God is merciful because he is omnipotent, and that such omnipotence is manifested in the benevolent action of God in his dealings with his creation. Towards human beings, in particular, punishment is never an end in itself but is always subservient to conversion. We note again that, compared with Philo, the book of Wisdom emphasises much more the theme of history, basing its own eschatological reflection precisely on Israel’s past and renouncing allegory entirely²⁰. It is, therefore, the background of the history of Israel with its collection of accounts of the action of God, at once salvific and punitive, which constrains the author of Wisdom not to pass over the emphasis which it also places on punishment. He thus distances himself in part from Philo but also from Aristeas and from the Hellenistic models of which he shows himself to be aware and to make use.

¹⁹ Cf. TERMINI, *Le potenze di Dio*, espec. 139–141.

²⁰ By contrast, cf. WINSTON, *A Century of Research*, 13–14: “Philo’s conception of the world historical process appears to be strictly impersonal. The sequence of world empires is determined by a cosmic principle of equality, a fundamental characteristic of the divine Logos”.

6 The Book of Wisdom: Between Biblical Faith and Hellenism

In conclusion, like Aristeas and Philo, the book of Wisdom demonstrates an effort to adapt a typically Hellenistic concept to the biblical faith. The Hellenistic concept in question is the Stoic-Platonic idea of a divinity only capable of doing the good. This idea includes the concept of the earthly sovereign who incarnates the divine action (cf. the treatises on kingship). The book of Wisdom adapts this Hellenistic concept to the biblical faith in a God who is good and generous to all his creation but also capable of punishing the wicked as is well demonstrated in the account of the Exodus which stands behind Wisdom 11–19.

As we have already mentioned, it is not possible wholly to exclude a polemical intention on the part of our author: in the face of such pretended earthly “benefactors”, the only one who truly does the good is God. The book of Wisdom is careful to avoid attributing the quality of εὐεργέτης to God directly, perhaps precisely to escape the ambiguity, dangerous for an Alexandrian Jew, that any earthly ruler could be described in this way as imitating the divine action. It is interesting to note that, in the book of Wisdom, the wordpair “punish”/“benefit” is referred only to God, and never to rulers, such as happens in 4 Macc 8:6, in Aristeas, and, at least in one case, also in Philo (cf. *supra*).

So then, a characteristic feature of the book of Wisdom lies in the fact that, with the exception of 3:4–5, the pair “punish”/“benefit” appears always in the frame of the seven Exodus-related antitheses, and, as we have noted, in a way that is programmatic at the beginning (11:5) and systematic within the first four antitheses (11:13; 16:2.9–11.24). The Philonic philosophical reflections on the Powers of God are lacking in Wisdom, and the biblical background of “punishing” and “benefiting” is undoubtedly much more marked. For our sage, “punish” and “benefit” have become special terms –although certainly not exclusive ones– to highlight the antithetical actions of God which stand at the basis of the seven antitheses of Wisdom 11–19. The profoundly biblical theme of the Exodus and the journey through the desert is thus reread in the light of a vocabulary that betrays clearly Hellenistic concepts.

Where “punishing” is concerned, our sage must always consider it within the mercy and pity of God, which, only in the face of the conscious refusal of humanity to accept them, are transformed into the definitive chastisement: death (cf. 4:17–19; 12:27; 19:4). It is no accident that the two final antitheses (18:5–25 and 19:1–9) relate to the death of the firstborn and to the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea. On the other hand, the same God who punishes is also the one who grants benefits to whoever believes in him. The influence of Hellenistic concepts

of the divinity is thus revealed in always causing the aspect of benevolence to prevail over that of punishment.

Finally, we must not pass over the fact that the first of the six occurrences of the wordpair “punish”/“benefit” present in Wisdom occurs in 3:4–5. In this way, there emerge the eschatological dimensions of the punitive and benevolent action of God, another theological novelty typical of our sage. For our sage, the historical action of God is the foundation and model of his eschatological action: he is a God who punishes, but, chiefly, a God who saves.

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