

# FOR A WORD OF WISDOM (WIS 18,14-16)

By Adrian Graffy

*«When peaceful silence enveloped all, and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-powerful Word like a stern warrior into the heart of the doomed land. Carrying your unambiguous command like a sharp sword it stood and filled the universe with death; though standing on the earth, it touched the sky» (Wisdom 18:14-16).*

On this seventh Sunday of the Word, we reflect on a biblical book that bridges Jewish and Greek culture, yet is little known in the Church and in society: the Book of Wisdom. Two verses from the Book of Wisdom (18:14-15a), the Wisdom of Solomon, feature in the Catholic liturgy on the days after Christmas, particularly as the ‘entrance antiphon’ for the Mass of the Second Sunday of Christmas.

Even though *logos* and *dabar* do not appear in Genesis 1 it is important to recall that the first act of God is to speak, to deliver the Word. Gen 1:1 provides the title ‘In the beginning God created heaven and earth’. Gen 1:2 gives us a description of the pre-creation chaos, with the ‘formless void’, the ‘darkness’ and the ‘mighty wind’. It is only in verse 3 that God begins to act, creating by the power of God’s word. The Word liberates reality from chaos, bringing light and life.

The power of the word is celebrated again in the final lines of Second Isaiah. As in Wisdom 18, Isaiah 55:10-11 speaks of the coming down of the Word: ‘As the rain and the snow come down (*yarad*) from the sky and do not return before watering the earth.....so it is with the word that goes forth from my mouth (*ken yihyeh debari asher yetse mippi*).’ He continues: ‘It does not return to me unfulfilled or before carrying out my purpose and achieving what it was sent to do’.

The Book of Wisdom, written probably in the second or first century BC, was composed in Greek in Egypt and is attributed to Solomon, remembered for his wisdom and his collection of wise sayings. [His wisdom ‘surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt’ (1 Kings 5:10). He ‘composed three thousand proverbs’ (v.10) some of which no doubt found their way into the book of Proverbs.]

The context is the hostility to and persecution of the Jews of Alexandria by the Ptolemies, rulers of Egypt after the collapse of the empire of Alexander the Great. The writer of Wisdom, thought to be a Jew of Hellenistic culture born and educated outside Palestine, is inspired by the legendary figure of Solomon. He contrasts the wisdom of Judaism with the violence of the pagans. In chapter 9 the

author puts into the heart and on the lips of Solomon a prayer for wisdom:

‘Grant me Wisdom that shares your throne.’ (v.4) The book as a whole is written for Jews persecuted in Egypt and perhaps tempted to embrace pagan ways.

The final part of the book, chapters 10 to 19, traces the presence of Wisdom in the story of Israel, from the ‘first man’ (10:1). The text refers in secretive fashion to Noah, Jacob, Joseph and Moses ‘the servant of the Lord’ (10:16). Their names do not appear in the text.

A midrash on the story of the Exodus, the relevance of which to the contemporary situation of the Jews in Alexandria is obvious, begins in 10:15. It reads ‘Wisdom delivered a holy people, a blameless race, from a nation of oppressors.’ The retelling of the story is guided by the following principle for understanding the action of God: ‘Thus what had served to punish their enemies became for them a benefit in their troubles.’ (11:5) Several ‘antitheses’ follow, examples of how the principle of understanding works.

The first antithesis (11:6-8) contrasts the water turned to blood as the first plague against Egypt in Exodus 7 with the provision of water for the people in the desert in Exodus 17:5-6. The antitheses are interrupted by several digressions, among which is a meditation on God’s ‘moderation’ and God’s ‘kindness’, for God is ‘lover of life’ (*philopsychos*) (11:26). God’s sovereignty makes God ‘lenient to all’ (12:16). A further lengthy digression on the cult of idols reaches its climax with the satire of the woodcutter, who makes an idol out of a piece of wood left over from making furniture (13:11-14).

A later antithesis considers the plague of darkness inflicted on Egypt and contrasts it with the pillar of fire which guided the people on their way (18:3-4). This is followed by consideration of the final plague, the death of the first-born of Egypt and the escape of the people. In 18:5 the writer recalls the decree of genocide of the males of Israel reported in Exodus 1, and the rescue of the child Moses: ‘As they had resolved to kill the infants of the holy ones, and as of those exposed only one child had been saved, you punished them by carrying off their horde of children and by destroying them all in the wild water’ (v.5). The second half of the verse combines the tenth plague, the slaughter of the first born of Egypt, with the disaster at the Red Sea.

There is then a poetic elaboration of the night of the Passover. The people await ‘the rescue of the upright and the ruin of the enemy’ (v.7). The hermeneutical principle announced earlier is at work again here: the same means by which the people are saved brings disaster to the enemy. The Red Sea is the way of escape for the people, and a trap for their enemies.

A few verses focus on the wailing of the people of Egypt mourning at the death of their first-born (v.10). ‘Slave and master’, ‘commoner and king’, suffered in the same way (v.11). There were not enough living to bury the dead. The followers of idols must now acknowledge that ‘this people is child of God’ (*theou huion laon einai*) (v.13).

And so to 18:14-15: ‘When peaceful silence enveloped all, and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-powerful Word like a stern warrior into the heart of the doomed land.’ The Word arrives at night, for the Lord had said to Pharaoh ‘At midnight I shall pass through Egypt.’ (Exodus 11:4). The fulfilment of these words comes in Exodus 12:29: ‘At midnight the Lord struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt: from the first-born of Pharaoh, who sits on his throne, to the first-born of the prisoner in the dungeon, and the first-born of all the livestock.’

In Wisdom 18:15 the Word (*logos*) is described as ‘all-powerful’ (*ho pantodynamos sou logos*). This powerful Word ‘though standing on the earth, touches the sky’ (18:16). Can we connect this with the powerful word of God in Genesis 1 and with the efficacious word of Isaiah 55? This Word is also a ‘warrior’ (*polemistes*), bringing death to a doomed land. This use of *logos* in the book of Wisdom must be set alongside the earlier verse ‘your Word, Lord, which heals all’ (*ho sos, kyrie, logos ho pantas iomenos*) in 16:12. For the Lord, as the following verse makes clear, ‘holds the power of life and death’ (*su gar zoes kai thanatou exousian echeis*) (16:13)

The final chapter of Wisdom celebrates in exuberant fashion the crossing of the Sea (chapter 19). For the Egyptians this is the final punishment (v.4), while the ‘whole creation’ is recreated to benefit those who are escaping (v.6). ‘They were like horses at pasture, they skipped like lambs, singing your praises Lord, their deliverer (v.9).

What are we to make of the ‘Word’ as presented in the book of Wisdom? It has the power of God for death and for life.

The choice of 18:14-15a for the liturgy of Christmas may have been driven by the ‘peaceful silence’ of night. The shepherds ‘keeping the night watch’ (Luke 2:8) were terrified by the ‘angel of the Lord’ and ‘the glory of the Lord’. This first announcement of the gospel (2:10), recalled in the gospel reading of the Christmas Night Mass, is a positive presentation of the all-powerful Word in Wisdom 18:15.

The primary activity of the Word is to ‘leap’ down from the royal throne. Acts uses the same dynamic verb *hallomai* (aorist *helato*) in reference to two lame men cured in 3:8 and 14:10. (See also Isaiah 35:6 and the lame leaping like a deer.) This Word, which brings death to the doomed land, is also the Word of God able to bring life (16:13). The use of this text at Christmas is surely also due to its ‘coming down’ (*helato*). In this it stands alongside John 1:14 and Colossians 3:16, two significant uses of *logos* in reference to Christ. From John: ‘The Word (*ho logos*) was made flesh, and made his tent (*eskenosen*) among us’. And, from Paul: ‘May the word of Christ (*ho logos tou Christou*) make his home (*enoikeito*) among you.’

The Word, which on one night visits the earth in Wisdom 18:15 to inflict punishment, in Christ comes to live and remain among us as a life-giving presence. What matters is that many words in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

and New Testament are capable of giving life, making everyone reflect on the need to open themselves up every day to their own good and that of others.