Spirituality, Hope, and the Care of the Self in the Book of Wisdom

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Abstract: This essay explores the spirituality of the Book of Wisdom in dialogue with Hellenistic philosophy, highlighting its relevance for the care of the self today. Written in Alexandria between 30 BCE and 41 CE, the Book of Wisdom presents itself not merely as a collection of sayings but as a protreptic discourse—a didactic exhortation urging its readers to adopt a way of life shaped by Wisdom. The study begins with a brief overview of the book's threefold structure: eschatology and the hope of immortality (Wis 1–6), Solomon's quest for Wisdom (Wis 6–9), and Wisdom's role in salvation history (Wis 10–19). It then examines the interior life through the categories of psychē, nous, pneuma, and kardia, emphasizing that true spirituality entails cultivating the self in openness to divine Wisdom. Central to this spirituality is hope in immortality—not as unending physical existence but as communion with God. Inspired by Stoic and Platonic traditions, the Sage encourages spiritual exercises such as meditation, temperance, and prayer as means of self-care and moral formation. The essay concludes by noting the enduring influence of the Book of Wisdom on Christian theology and spirituality, where it continues to offer a resource for shaping life, virtue, and hope.

Key words: Book of Wisdom, Hellenistic philosophy, Spiritual exercises, Interiority, Immortality, Hope, Virtue, Self-care

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Introduction

The Book of Wisdom is part of what has come to be called the sapiential pentateuch—a designation coined to group together five wisdom books: Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), Sirach, and the Book of Wisdom. These books offer not only theological, speculative, and pedagogical reflections but also practical guide to moral and spiritual living. This has been shown in the work of the late Fr. Anthony Ceresko, OSFS (+2015, DWST Tagaytay; CBAP member). His 1999 textbook on wisdom literature is subtitled *A Spirituality for Liberation*.[1]

Another relevant voice is the Anglican biblical scholar John Eaton, whose book *The Contemplative Face of Old Testament Wisdom in the Context of World Religions* (1989) reflects a concern to rediscover biblical wisdom in dialogue with other faith traditions.[2]

It is also commonly recognized that among the four books associated with the Solomonic corpus—Proverbs, Qoheleth, Song of Songs, and the Book of Wisdom—it is the latter that shows the most positive influence from Hellenistic philosophy. This is demonstrated in the work of James Reese, *Hellenistic Influence on the Book of Wisdom and Its Consequences* (1973).[3]

Recent studies on ancient philosophy, especially Middle Platonism and Stoicism, argue that philosophy in antiquity was not primarily a theoretical endeavor aimed at constructing metaphysical or epistemological systems. Rather, it was "a way of life," as philosopher Pierre Hadot puts it in his book *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1981 first French edition) which exhorted students to engage in "spiritual exercises" that cultivated the self in harmony with nature and reason (*logos*).[4] Michel Foucault would later develop this notion further in his work "Technologies of the Self" (1988).[5]

It was thanks to a short article by Jerome Schaper on the Book of Wisdom in the *Cambridge Companion to the Bible* series—where he briefly mentions the idea of spiritual exercises—that I began to invest more time in this line of study.[6] Today's trend in spirituality is noticeably Stoic-inspired, as shown in recent

[1] Anthony Ceresko, OSFS, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

[2] John Eaton, *The Contemplative Face of Old Testament Wisdom in the Context of World Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1989).

[3] James Reese, *Hellenistic Influence on the Book of Wisdom and Its Consequences* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1973).

[4] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995; first French ed., 1981).

[5] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16–49.

[6] Jerome Schaper, "Wisdom of Solomon," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Wisdom Literature*, ed. Katherine J. Dell, Suzanna R. Millar, and Arthur Jan Keefer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 283-302.

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literature advocating for spiritual practices aimed at the care of the psyche—the cultivation of the self or self-care.[7]

This essay will proceed as follows: first, a brief overview of the Book of Wisdom; second, a discussion on the concept of the "soul" (*psyche*) as interiority; third, a short note on the role of hope in Wisdom spirituality. The main section will explore spiritual exercise as a form of self-care, involving meditation, the practice of the virtue of temperance, and prayer. The essay concludes with a note on the influence of the Book of Wisdom on the Christian tradition, including its continuing relevance today as a resource for spirituality.

A Bird's-Eye View of the Book of Wisdom

The author of the Book of Wisdom, an Alexandrian Jew writing in the persona of Solomon, is often referred to as "the Sage" (*ho sophos*), as St. John Chrysostom called him. He composed his magnum opus slightly earlier than the Jewish Hellenistic philosopher Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE – 50 CE). Interestingly, Saint Jerome once considered Philo to be the author of the Book of Wisdom. Also known as the Wisdom of Solomon, this work was written in Alexandria, Egypt, in refined Hellenistic Greek—along with 2 Maccabees, it is one of the only Old Testament books composed originally in this language. The book was likely completed sometime after the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE, during the latter part of the reign of Octavian Augustus (30 BCE – 14 CE), and before the reign of the emperor Caligula (37–41 CE).[8]

In the intellectual climate of Hellenistic Alexandria, philosophers were passionate about the ideal of the Perfect Sage (*ho sophos teleios*). It is therefore not surprising that the author of the Book of Wisdom, henceforth, the Sage, presents King Solomon as both the ideal king and the perfect sage, even attributing authorship of the book to him. For Philo, by contrast, the perfect philosopher was not Solomon, but Moses.[9]

There is a common agreement to divide the book into three parts, a division that is followed by most modern translations:[10]

- *Part I: Book of Eschatology* – Wisdom's Gift of Immortality (1:1 – 6:21)

[7] For example, see Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman, *The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living* (New York: Portfolio, 2016).

[8] Luca Mazzinghi, *Weisheit*, IEKAT (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2018), 31-32. See also Mark Giszczak, *Wisdom of Solomon,* Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 22-24. Contra: David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 23.

[9] Nathalie LaCoste, "Solomon the Exemplary Sage: The Convergence of Hellenistic and Jewish Traditions in the Wisdom of Solomon," *University of Toronto Journal for Jewish Thought* 1 (2010): 1-23.

[10] *New American Bible, Revised Edition* (NABRE); *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV).

- *Part II: Book of Wisdom* – Power of Wisdom and Solomon's Quest for Her (6:22 – 9:18)
- *Part III: Book of History* – Divine Wisdom in Exodus (10 – 19)

In Part I, the focus of the Sage's meditation is on the destiny of the righteous and the wicked, a typical wisdom theme. True to the Sage's Jewish background in traditional wisdom, righteousness must be rewarded, and wickedness deserves punishment. The Sage, however, goes even further—a breakthrough so to speak—when his rumination leads him to posit "immortality" (*athanasia*) as the reward of the righteous person after death. This new teaching has its roots in Greek philosophy (cf. immortality of the soul).[11] The Sage teaches that the righteous even if they die, their hope of immortality is fulfilled (cf. 3:4b). Unlike the Greeks, immortality is a divine gift or a gift of Wisdom (cf. 8:13) to the righteous and so is not inherent in the person. Immortality is not to be equated with an unending and linear physical existence. In contrast, it is the state of blessed communion with God and with his saints (Wis 5:5).

Death for the righteous is a reality but temporary; it is but only a passageway to that kind of life with God. Another term that the Sage uses for immortality is "incorruption" (*aphtharsia* cf. 2:23; 6:18-19). Death for the wicked is permanent and it is the worst of form of punishment as it is the total absence of God. "But by the envy of evil," says the Sage, "death entered the world, and they who are allied with him experience it" (2:24). The wicked, in contrast, say, "there is no remedy for dying" (2:1) and so "let us enjoy the good things that are here" (2:6). This hedonistic philosophy was from the Epicureans who also taught that the existence of God is absurd.[12]

Part II begins like Part I, with the exhortation to seek Wisdom. This is Wisdom book proper. The Sage meditates on the nature of Wisdom in the voice of a Wisdom-seeker, presumably King Solomon as the name is not explicit. Wisdom is God's gift (8:21b); present at the time of creation (9:9b); and those who acquire it win the "friendship" (*philia*) of God (7:14b). The secret of immortality lies in kinship with Wisdom (8:17b; cf. v. 13 also). Kinship (*syngganeia*) with the gods is a feature in Plato's *Timaeus* which is taken up by Philo who thought that human beings possess a natural kinship with God based on reason.[13] This section (9:1-18) concludes with a prayer by the king for God to grant him Wisdom (v. 4a).

In Part III, the Sage meditates on the story of the Exodus. It begins with a presentation of salvation history, from Adam to Moses, in which Wisdom acted as protector, redeemer, and provider (cf. Wisdom 10). The Exodus is thus interpreted

[11] John J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 191–94.

[12] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, X.119–135 (on Epicurus).

[13] Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation, in The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 12–17.

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as a reflection of divine providence—not only for Israel but even in relation to its enemies. The Sage employs *synkrisis*, a literary device of Greek origin that draws comparisons between opposites. For instance, the very elements used by God to punish the Egyptians became sources of blessing for the Israelites. The water that turned into blood—the first plague—became the life-giving water the Israelites drank in the wilderness (cf. Wis 11:5–8).[14]

Within the five *synkriseis*, the Sage inserts two sub-meditations (sometimes labeled "digressions"): one on God's mercy (11:17–12:22), and the other on the folly of idolatry (13:1–15:18).

To conclude this part and prepare for the central questions ahead: How, then, can we argue that the Sage intended his work not merely as an anthology of wise sayings—like those found in Proverbs or Sirach—but as a deliberate tool for cultivating spirituality? The answer lies in the book's genre. Scholars widely recognize the Book of Wisdom as an example of *logos protreptikos*, a genre of didactic exhortation aimed not just at imparting religious knowledge but at convincing to a way of life in accordance with Wisdom. The Sage intended to offer a basis for spiritual exercises—one that resonates with the practices promoted by Hellenistic philosophers.[15]

Spirituality, the *Psychē* and the Interior Life

Wisdom, as defined by the German Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad, is "the practical knowledge of the laws of life and of the world based on experience."[16] Although this definition may seem limited, it nevertheless captures, in a nutshell, the essence of the so-called sapiential Pentateuch in the Roman Catholic canon—Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon.

The term "practical" (*praxis*) here refers not only to the cultivation of human skills (*techne*)—especially those meant to guide the young, to whom most wisdom texts are addressed—but also to other dimensions of personal development. These include moral formation (*paideia*) and spirituality, understood as the lived experience of faith in the God of Israel.[17] This spiritual dimension is expressed, for example, through friendship with God (*philoi theou*, Wis 7:27) and kinship with Wisdom (*syngeneia sophias*, Wis 8:17), Wisdom being "the breath of the power (*dynamis*) of God" (Wis 7:25).

For the *praxis* of "spirituality" in the Book of Wisdom, one must first consider the Sage's understanding and emphasis on interiority, particularly as

[14] Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon*, 227.

[15] Schaper, "The Book of Wisdom," 297-301.

[16] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), p. 418.

[17] Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 365–68.

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expressed through the term *psychē* ("soul"), which appears 19 times in the book. It is well known that anthropology in the Hebrew Bible is not dualistic. The Hebrew term *nephesh* (literally "throat"), often translated in the Septuagint as *psychē*, is not the opposite of *basar* ("flesh" or "body"), but rather another term for the whole human being. These terms are not in contrast but function in parallel. In short, in the Hebrew Bible, the human person does not possess a soul but is a soul.[18]

When we come to the Book of Wisdom, *psychē* is still not presented as a dualistic counterpart to the body. Although it is now more clearly distinguished, it serves primarily to express the interior life. Wisdom 9:15 is a striking example: "For the corruptible body burdens the soul, and the earthly tent weighs down the mind with its many concerns."

The language used in this verse has clear Platonic overtones (as noted by Winston and Mazzinghi).[19] The verbs *barynō* ("to burden") and *brithō* ("to weigh down") appear in Plato's writings, particularly in the myth of the soul in *Phaedrus* 247b, which presupposes a tripartite anthropology—*sōma* (body), *psychē* (soul), and *nous* (mind).[20] However, such a tripartite division is not found in the Book of Wisdom. For Plato, the soul becomes defiled by the body during its embodied existence, making the body a hindrance to the soul's ascent. In contrast, while the Book of Wisdom refers to the body as an "earthly tent," this does not imply a devaluation of the body. Rather, it conveys the idea of provisionality—like a tent, the body is a temporary dwelling on the soul's journey toward immortality. The corruptible body (*phthartos*) is destined for incorruptibility (*aphtharsia*). According to Mazzinghi, even if Wis 9:15 bears a Platonic tone, the author uses the term *psychē* more in a psychological and epistemological sense rather than a metaphysical one.[21]

In the puzzling and much-discussed passage of Wisdom 8:19–20, where the Sage appears to reflect on the preexistence of the soul in line with Platonic thought, Vílchez argues that the Sage first presents the Platonic idea (v. 19) only to correct it shortly after (v. 20). The passage, then, can be understood as a metaphorical way of emphasizing the interior moral quality of the human person.[22]

In Wis 9:15, another term that expresses the interior life is *nous* ("mind"; cf. 4:12), which here appears as a synonym parallel to *psychē*, both described as burdened with "many concerns" (*polyphrontida*). Liberation from such anxieties does not come through escape from the body but through the reception of Wisdom—a divine gift that must be prayed for and received from God.

Building on this, the *Sage* develops the concept of *pneuma* as a marker of the interior life of the human person, but it does so against the backdrop of the

[18] Ibid., 359.

[19] Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 200–202; Mazzinghi, *Weisheit*, 274.

[20] Plato, Phaedrus, 246a–249d, esp. 247b.

[21] Mazzinghi, *Weisheit*, 274.

[22] José Vílchez Líndez, *La Sabiduría de Salomón* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1990), 254–59.

Hebrew *ruach*. In the Hebrew Bible, *ruach* denotes God's creative and animating breath (Gen 2:7; Ezek 37:9–10), as well as the divine Spirit that guides, inspires, and sanctifies the human heart (Isa 11:2). Translated into Greek as *pneuma* in the Septuagint, this concept acquires new resonance in Hellenistic Alexandria. Here, *pneuma* is the God-given breath of life (Wis 15:11), a holy and disciplined spirit sensitive to truth (Wis 1:4–5), and the mode by which divine Wisdom enters and transforms the human person (Wis 7:22–23; 9:17). Unlike the Stoic concept of *pneuma*—an impersonal, material force that permeates the cosmos and structures nature—the *Sage* understands *pneuma* in continuity with *ruach* as a personal gift from God.[23]

Interior life, then, is not neutral but fundamentally spiritual and ethical. Thus, the exordium of the Book of Wisdom (its opening verses) turns into an exhortation: to love justice, to think (*phroneō*) of the Lord in goodness, and to seek Him in "integrity of heart" (*en aplotēti kardias*). Like the soul and the mind, and later the kidney, the heart (*kardia*) belongs to the semantic field of the interior life.

The sage teaches that wisdom does not enter into a soul that plots evil (*kakotechnos psychē*), nor does she dwell in a body enslaved to sin (Wis 1:4). The opposite of an interior life is thus a "soul" that is *kakotechnos*—literally, "of evil craft"—an oxymoronic term that reappears in Wisdom 15:4 in the context of the sage's critique of idolatry.

A "soul" whose intentions are evil cannot be considered to possess an authentic interior life or genuine spirituality, for "the holy spirit of discipline" (*hagion pneuma paideias*) is absent or has been withdrawn (Wis 1:5). Wisdom is described as a "kindly spirit" (*philanthrōpon pneuma*) that comes down from on high (Wis 9:17), entering the soul so that the human being becomes a "friend of God" (Wis 7:27).

For this reason, God is described as the "witness of the inmost self" (NABRE trans. of the *nephros*, lit. kidney) and the "true overseer" (*episkopos alēthēs*) of the heart (*kardia*). It is through the cultivation of this interior life that the hope for immortality is ultimately fulfilled (Wis 3:4).

Spirituality and the Hope of Immortality

The cultivation of the interior life in the Book of Wisdom is seen as an ongoing project of the human being. Educability is presumed in the pupil of the scribe or sage. The must student must be capable of receiving "instruction" (*paideia*) which includes both moral and spiritual lessons, and that the cultivation of spirituality will form a habit (*aretē*, virtue).

[23] John J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 196–199.

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The final goal of this process is immortality—depicted not merely as endless existence, but as blessed communion with the saints and with God himself (Wis 5:5). This eschatological vision of immortality serves then as the object of hope (*elpis*), which in turn shapes and inspires the human person to engage in the deliberate nourishment of the spiritual life.[24]

Spiritual Exercise and the Care of the *Psyche*

As mentioned earlier, ancient philosophy, as argued by Pierre Hadot, is not primarily concerned with constructing a system of thought but with "a way of life" centered on spiritual exercises.[25] These exercises aim to cultivate the self (i.e., *cura animarum*) understood not as a Gnostic preconception (dualistic) but as the inner life of the person.

Meditations

The Hellenistic influence in the Book of Wisdom has been well studied,[26] as has the work of the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria.[27] The care for the interior life found in both the Book of Wisdom and in Philo exemplifies a broader trend among ancient philosophers—especially the Stoics and Epicureans—who were more concerned with the moral and practical cultivation of the self than with the pursuit of theoretical knowledge. This kind of activity intended to transform and fortify the psyche anticipates what we might today call "spiritual exercises."[28]

In the exordium of the book, the exhortation opens with three imperatives all in aorist tense: "Love justice! Think of the Lord! Seek Him (1:1)." The aorist (as ingressive) indicates that the Sage urges his audience, "judges of the earth" (a term for young Alexandrian Jews), a decisive turn toward divine justice—a foundational act for those who wish to understand or judge rightly. The sense should be: *Begin to love justice! Begin to think of the Lord! Begin to seek him!* It is therefore the start of a spiritual exercise wherein the person is urged to decide to take the first step, as the first step is always the hardest.

Here, one may think of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus and his teaching on the path to wisdom, which begins with *prohairesis*—the rational moral will to begin living in accordance with nature and reason (*logos*).[29] Like the Sage,

[24] Randolf C. Flores, "A Note on Hope and Immortality." *Diwa: Studies in Philosophy and Theology* 37 (2011): 56–62.

[25] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 265.

[26] Reese, *Hellenistic Influence on the Book of Wisdom.*

[27] David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

[28] Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951).

[29] Epictetus, *Discourses*, trans. W. A. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).

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the Stoics emphasize that transformation begins with a decisive act of the will: "Begin!" Marcus Aurelius, likewise, reminds himself in the *Meditations* to "get up and do what needs to be done," showing how the initial step is often the most difficult act yet the most important.[30] For Epictetus, then, *prohairesis* must be cultivated through daily "spiritual exercises" aimed at strengthening and refining the moral will.

For the Stoics, the goal of philosophy is the practice of *aretē* (virtue), which aligns a person to live in accordance with nature and *logos*. They identify four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. Similarly, for the Sage, justice is not merely a concept but a program of life that demands the serious cultivation of virtues. The Sage states in Wis 8:7 that if someone loves justice, then the fruits of the labors of this one (*ταύτης*, i.e., Lady Wisdom) are the virtues taught by her: temperance (*sōphrosynē*), prudence (*phronēsis*), justice (*dikaiosynē*), and fortitude (*andreia*). "Nothing in life," the Sage says, "is more useful for mortals than these."

However, unlike Stoic justice, the Sage's understanding is rooted in the Jewish tradition, particularly in the prophetic vision of the Old Testament (e.g., the concept of *mishpat*, or social justice). In the Old Testament, God is always present where justice is, as the prophets of Israel consistently affirm—for instance, "For I, the LORD, love justice" (LXX Isa 61:8). This idea is combined with the Hellenistic notion of *dikaiosynē*, which also conveys a friendly relationship with God, hence "righteousness" in some modern translations. The social dimension of justice in the Book of Wisdom is illustrated concretely in the third part of the book, with its strong emphasis on *philanthrōpia*.

It makes sense then that the next lines have God as a synonymous parallel of "justice." The verb "to think of the Lord in goodness" (*phroneo en agathoteti*) may also mean "correctly"; it is the Sage's way of connecting love of justice with one's correct image of God. We are reminded of the famous oracle of Jeremiah to King Jehoiakim:

> If your father ate and drank and it went well with him, it was because he practiced justice and righteousness; he did justice for the poor and needy, and that is truly to know me — oracle of the Lord (Jer 22:15–16).

An Israelite like Jeremiah would never separate the realm of knowledge—whose seat is the psyche—from the inside, to which belongs the practice of justice toward those on the margins of society. In the meditation on idolatry (in the third part of the Book of Wisdom), the author will show that injustices have their origin in the false image that people have of God.

"To think of the Lord and to seek Him with integrity of heart" appears to be also an adaptation of the spiritual exercises or *askesis* among the Stoics. Care for the self is an important part of *askesis* for the Stoics. The spiritual practice

[30] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays (New York: Modern Library, 2002).

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includes activities like meditation, self-examination, and thinking things through. Marcus Aurelius is a well-known example. His *Meditations* are personal writings that help him discipline his soul, remember Stoic principles, and develop inner virtue.[31] Epictetus said that people should meditate every day, write down their thoughts (journaling), and always be aware of their thoughts and choices in order to bring their will (*prohairesis*) in line with nature and *logos*.

The Sage must also be familiar with the wisdom psalm, the very first one in the psalter, on the activity of a happy person whose "will" (LXX *thelema*) is in the Torah of the Lord and so "meditates" on it (Heb. *hagah* = to mutter; LXX *meletao*) day and night (Psalm 1:2). For the Sage, meditation is thinking of the Lord and seeking him both diligently and with sincerity of heart (*en aploteti kardias*), i.e., single-hearted or with focused or undivided attention. Those exercises develop the desire and love for Wisdom by learning her words (cf. Wis 6:10–11), or muttering them and even memorizing them, as the Stoics do in their meditations. The Sage advises his pupils to rise early at dawn to "seek her" and "to meditate on her" (*enthymetomai*), which is the "perfection of prudence" (*phroneos teleiotes*), and one who is "keeping awake for her" (*agrypneo*) will immediately be "free from care" (*amerimnos*) (Wis 6:14–15). The Sage must have in mind the Stoics and Epicureans' spiritual exercise of *askesis*, which results in *ataraxia* (lit. without disturbance) or freedom from cares.

For the Sage then, the first step (*archē*) toward Wisdom is the love (*agathe*) and earnest desire for her "discipline" (*paideia*) which includes the "reflection" (*phrontis*), "keeping" (*tēresis*), and "attention" (*prosochē*) of her "laws" (*nomoi*), i.e., the commandments found in the Torah. Such spiritual exercises constitute the firm hope of immortality (*bebaiōsis aphtharsia*). Immortality "makes one close to God," says the Sage, through the desire for Wisdom (cf. Wis 6:9–21).

It also appears that a component of the Sage's meditation, prescribed to his pupils as a spiritual exercise, includes: (1) the enumeration and repetition of the 21 attributes of Wisdom (Wis 7:22–23); (2) a contemplative reflection on the omnipresent nature of Wisdom in creation (vv. 24–30); and (3) Solomon's internal dialogue, not unlike Epictetus' *Discourses*, on the beauty of Wisdom, marked by his repeated use of the first-person pronoun "I" (Wisdom 8).

In a manner resembling today's litany or even mantra (see Wis 7:22–23), the construction of the Greek text in Wisdom 7:22–23 suggests a kind of poetry designed to be recited and memorized for meditation, akin to the *aretologies* of Isis. The worship of the goddess Isis was popular in Alexandria during the Greco-Roman period.

We can consider here the influence of these attributes on the monastic tradition. One can think of Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395), who, in his work *The*

[31] Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius,* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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Life of Moses, describes the mystical ascent of the soul to God (*theosis*) as a gradual transformation into the divine likeness through contemplation (*theoria*) and the practice (*praxis*) of divine virtues. For Gregory, this imitation (*mimesis*) involves recollection (*anamnesis*) of the divine attributes and their enactment in life—a process that parallels the formative function of Wisdom's attributes.

Speaking of *anamnesis*, the third part of the Sage's work (the so-called "Book of History" in Wisdom 10 onward) can be considered a recollection of how Wisdom acted in the history of ancient Israel, beginning with Adam and culminating in Moses (Exodus and Sinai). The Sage does not write a conventional historiography like that found in the works of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (c. 37 BCE – 100 CE), but rather offers a reflective account shaped by the Greek rhetorical style of *synkrisis*, which may have been intended as a form of meditation for his students. He presents a fresh interpretation of salvation history, in which Israel's past is portrayed as guided by the providential care of Wisdom through chosen figures in each generation. As mentioned earlier, within the five major *synkriseis* are two meditations (or "digressions"): one on God's mercy (11:17–12:22), and another on the folly of idolatry (13:1–15:18). In the meditation on mercy, God is addressed as "lover of souls" (*philopsychos*).

On *Sōphrosynē*, Temperance

One of four cardinal virtues of the Stoics alongside wisdom, courage, and justice is temperance (*sōphrosynē*).[32] Temperance in Stoicism is achieved not by theory alone, but through spiritual exercise that train the soul to detach from inordinate pleasures, discipline desire, encourage mindfulness and self-mastery.[33] The temperate person is not controlled by food, sex, praise, or possessions. Instead, they find joy (*eudaimonia*) in living according to nature and reason.[34] Stoic temperance leads to *autarkeia* (self-mastery) and *ataraxia* (freedom from cares).[35]

In Wis 8:7, already quoted above, the Sage adopts—but reorients— the Stoic four cardinal virtues. It is Wisdom who teaches these virtues, and temperance (*sōphrosynē*) and prudence (*phronēsis*) are listed first, even before justice (*dikaiosynē*) and fortitude (*andreia*).[36] This ordering signals the hierarchical priority of temperance.

In providing tools for reflection—perhaps as a guide for meditation—the Sage provides the students a lexicon of temperance using a range of Hellenistic

[32] A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 200–202.

[33] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 82–85.

[34] John Sellars, *Stoicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 108.

[35] Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 318–20.

[36] David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 194.

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terms. Among them are *philanthrōpia* (“humane kindness”), *eleos* (“mercy”), *kat’ oligon* and *kata brachu* (“little by little”), *epieikeia* (“clemency”), *pheidōs* (“forbearance”), *dikaiosynē* (“righteousness”), *prosochē* (“attentiveness”), *diesis* (“indulgence”), and *metriotēti* (possibly for *myriotēti*, “with measured deliberation”).[37]

In the Sage’s meditation on mercy (in third part of the book), temperance is not merely a moral discipline or *askesis* but a divine virtue. The Sage ruminates on how God, being a “lover of humanity” (*philanthrōpos*), exercised moderation in punishing the traditional enemies of ancient Israel—the Canaanites and the Egyptians (cf. Wis 11:23–12:2). It is striking that the Sage could portray God as practicing temperance and allowing *metanoia* (repentance) even to the Egyptians, especially considering that, during the Sage’s time in Alexandria, “*mixonenia*,” hatred of foreigners, was rampant. Anti-Jewish polemics circulated among the Greek and Egyptian Alexandrians. These caricatured the Jews’ ancestors as lowly, leprous, and diseased slaves—animals in human form—who had desecrated the Egyptian gods and were thus driven out of Egypt by divine wrath.[38]

For the Sage, the pupils are exhorted not to only pray for prudence (cf. Wis 7:7) but to imitate the God (cf. Plato’s *homoiosis theou*) who created them in his own “likeness” (*aidiotētos*, cf. Wis 2:23).[39] The exercise of temperance is a divine activity taught by God himself, which is the foundation for “good hope” (*euelpis*).

Even the way the Sage portrayed the punitive action of God is a result of divine discernment as it was done “with attention and indulgence” (*prosochē* and *diesis*) that is, with “careful investigation” (12:20) and “with measured deliberation” (*metriotēti* instead of LXX *myriotēti*). “Therefore, to give us a lesson,” concludes the Sage, “you punish our enemies with measured deliberation so that we may meditate [*merimnaō*] on your goodness, and when we are judged, we may expect mercy” (Wis 12:22).

On Prayer as Spiritual Exercise

In *Meditations* 4.23, Marcus Aurelius offers a prayer to the Universe (*kosmos*) and to Nature (*physis*):

> Everything harmonizes with me, which is harmonious with you, O Universe. Nothing is too early or too late for me if it is in due time for you. Everything is fruit to me that your seasons bring, O Nature: from you are all things, in you are all things, to you all things return.[40]

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[37] Ibid., 245–47.

[38] Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 272-74.

[39] Plato, *Theaetetus,* 176b.

[40] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 4.23.

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The Stoics consider prayer (*euchē*) a form of spiritual exercise (*askēsis*), but not in the sense of a petition asking for external intervention.[41] It is not addressed to a personal deity or to the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus. Rather, Stoic prayer serves to help the individual align their soul with Nature (*physis*) or with divine Reason (*Logos*).[42]

For the Sage, even though Wisdom is divine in the sense that she is "a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty" (Wis 7:25) and was "with [God] when he made the world" (Wis 9:9), the prayer of Solomon is not addressed to her but to a personal and to one God—the God of his ancestors, the "God of my ancestors, Lord of mercy, who have made all things by your word (*logos*)" (Wis 9:1).[43] Thus, Wisdom, the universe, and nature are all God's creation—not separate divine beings, nor gods and goddesses.

A follow-up to this is the Sage's meditation found in the third part of the Book of Wisdom, which includes a digression on the folly of idolatry (Wis 13:1–15:19) and a reflection on the beauty of creation. Nature worship and mystery cults were popular in Egypt, but these practices go against the logic of divine wisdom—the wisdom of the Creator who made all things by his *logos*. Nature is indeed beautiful, but as the Sage asserts, "the original source of beauty fashioned them" (Wis 13:3), and "from the greatness and the beauty of created things, their original author, by analogy, is seen" (Wis 13:5).

In Wisdom 9, the Sage offers a prayer that clearly reworks earlier versions of Solomon's prayer found in 1 Kgs 3:6–9 and 2 Chron 1:9–10. Unlike the more historical or royal tone of those earlier accounts, this version adopts a meditative format, closely tied to the reflection on Wisdom in the preceding chapters (Wisdom 7–8). A key feature of this prayer is Solomon's self-examination, which bears resemblance to the Stoic practice of daily self-reflection—typically done in the evening—to assess whether one has lived according to *logos*.

For the Sage, however, self-examination is not grounded in autonomous reason but in the recognition of human frailty and radical dependence on the God of his ancestors. Wisdom is not something one cultivates on one's own; it must be sent from above. Wisdom is a divine gift:

> I am a weak and short-lived mortal, with little understanding of judgment and laws… even if one is perfect among mortals, without the Wisdom that comes from you, he will be regarded as nothing. (Wis 9:5–6).

Thus, the Sage prays:

> With you is Wisdom, she who knows your works and was present when you made the world… Send her forth from your holy heavens… to be

[41] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 128–31.

[42] A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 206–9.

[43] Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 217.

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> with me and toil with me, that I may know what is pleasing to you. (Wis 9:9–10).

The goal of this meditation is not self-sufficiency but righteous action in accordance with God's will: "Thus the paths of those on earth were set right, and people were taught what pleases you, and were saved by Wisdom." (Wis 9:18). In this way, the Book of Wisdom integrates tradition and Hellenistic philosophical style, offering a deeply spiritual form of self-examination where the "soul" (*psychē*) opens to divine Wisdom, rather than turning inward alone.

Influence of the Book of Wisdom on Tradition

The Book of Wisdom clearly provided early Christians with a theological vocabulary to articulate a Christology rooted in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament. A compelling example is the Johannine *Logos*. Though the wisdom tradition is less prominent in the Synoptic Gospels, it is nevertheless present. Jesus, for instance, once spoke of "wisdom vindicated by her works" (cf. Matt 11:19; Luke 7:35).

Paul also appears familiar with the wisdom tradition. He declares that Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24), and that Christ is "the image of the invisible God," through whom and for whom all things were created (Col 1:15–16). The early Christological debates that culminated in the Nicene Creed (325 CE) further illustrate this influence. There, Jesus is proclaimed as "Light from Light," a phrase closely linked to Wisdom 7:26, where Lady Wisdom is described as the *apaugasma* (reflection) of eternal light.

The Book of Wisdom also contributed to the development of eucharistic tradition. In Greek thought, immortality was reserved for the gods, who were sustained by a divine food—*ambrosia*. For the Sage, divine sustenance is symbolized by the manna given to the Israelites in the desert—"bread from heaven" (cf. Ps 105:40)—described as "the food of angels" (cf. Ps 78:25), a verse which became the basis for *Panis Angelicus* of Thomas Aquinas. This ambrosial food, described as icelike and quick to melt (cf. Wis 19:21), is unlimited, ready to eat, pleasurable, and "sweet to every taste" (cf. Wis 16:20; *omne delectamentum in se habentem*, as prayed during Benediction). It is this food that brings the sapiential righteous to immortality (cf. Wis 16:23).

We should also note that the Book of Wisdom occupies a special place in the history of Jewish and Christian mysticism. Gregory of Nyssa, as mentioned earlier, is a key example.[44] Along with the other Solomonic books—Sirach, Proverbs, and The Song of Songs—it provided important texts for spirituality and mystical reflection in antiquity.

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[44] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 114–15.

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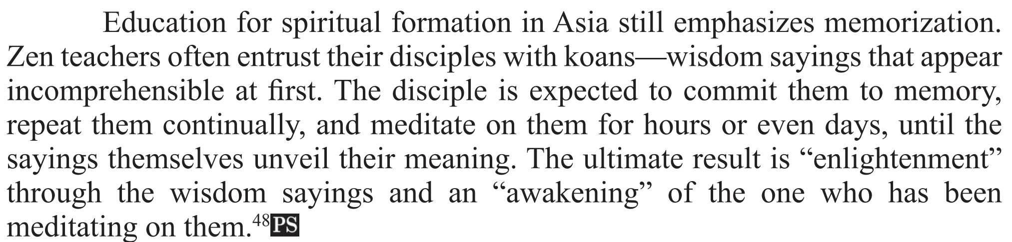
After the Second Temple period, there was a noticeable shift within the Solomonic corpus: attention moved from Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach toward The Song of Songs (e.g., Bernard of Clairvaux).[45] This shift may be due, at least in part, to the canonical status of Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach.[46]

Nevertheless, this should not prevent us today from recovering the Sage's original intent—as resources for spiritual exercises geared toward self-care or the *cura animarum*—whether in the context of Christianity, Judaism, or even among those, like the ancient Stoics, who sought to live in accordance with nature and reason.[47]

As a postscript, it is striking what a Maria Ko Ha-Fong, a Chinese biblical scholar, observes about reading the Bible in the Asian context: that readers will be helped especially when reading wisdom literature." She therefore proposes a mode of engaging with biblical texts that resembles the way sages in Zen Buddhism approach their own scriptures—through what might be called a "third eye": an eye that sees into the depths and penetrates regions hidden from a superficial or reductive gaze. This is, in effect, a kind of "hermeneutics of the third eye." Ko Ha Fong elaborates:



Education for spiritual formation in Asia still emphasizes memorization. Zen teachers often entrust their disciples with koans—wisdom sayings that appear incomprehensible at first. The disciple is expected to commit them to memory, repeat them continually, and meditate on them for hours or even days, until the sayings themselves unveil their meaning. The ultimate result is "enlightenment" through the wisdom sayings and an "awakening" of the one who has been meditating on them.[48] PS

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[45] Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs I*, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971).

[46] William Horbury, "The Wisdom of Solomon in Ancient Mysticism" in *Reading Tests, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture an Theology*, ed. David F. Flord and Graham Stanton (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 185-201.

[47] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83–85.

[48] Maria Ko Ha Fong, "Reading the Bible in the Asian Context," *Bulletin Dei Verbum 38* (1996): 11-25.

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