

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 7 Theme: **Our Incarnate God**

Title: **“Wise Man Seeks Lasting Relationship with Divine Creator; Will Follow Law”**

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“My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!” (Gal 4:19)

As we draw near to the annual celebration of our Lord’s Nativity according to the flesh, I find myself contemplating the incarnation in different ways. Certainly the incarnation of the Crucified One is a divine mystery which we understand in terms of our theological definitions. But how did the Apostle Paul understand our Incarnate Lord that he was able to say this to the Galatians? As it happened, Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection was unexpected, all the more so as we apply doctrinal definitions backward into the New Testament writings. And the Holy Spirit has a clear and active role in a person’s ability to confess Jesus as Lord, but how does any human arrive at this point? The disciples had extensive preparation, and were still amazed, so how was Paul able to understand *on any level* his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-20) such that he could proclaim Jesus as the Son of God even before his sojourn in the desert (cf. Gal 1:16-2:2)? Are there visible antecedents to the ‘fullness of time’ (cf. Eph 1:10) in which we now stand, and how did they extend from God’s chosen people Israel to the Gentiles, such that we can all agree that “The Lord is One” (Deut 6:4; Mk 12:29)?

Following the lead of Jesus himself (Lk 24:25-33, 44-49), Christians of every generation have searched the scriptures as Paul did, to understand Christ. On a parallel line, I would like to very briefly consider the development of humanity such that we are able to accept the incarnation. The following is an overview of a subtle but crucial shift in Jewish theology which occurred perhaps two hundred years before the Crucifixion, and which is essentially devoid of messianic expectations, but addresses a central issue of humanity’s desire to know God. This seems to be a major instance of preparation of humanity for the reception of the gospel. Interestingly enough, the author of the work even bears the name Jesus!

The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira^[1] seems at first glance to be a restatement of traditional Jewish wisdom found in Proverbs, Job or Ecclesiastes. And this Wisdom literature of the Old Testament has two general characteristics which a reader would do well to remember. First, the underlying themes of the texts are *very* old. Second (and related to their age), they are not especially Jewish in origin, but a collection of well-known proverbs from around the ancient Near East which are laced with Jewish themes to make them acceptable.^[2] So when Ben Sira begins to reiterate these to a new audience, one wonders if he is simply trying to demonstrate compatibility between Judaism and the Hellenism of the day.^[3] This would seem to hold true with his treatment of “Wisdom” as both a human virtue and as the personified primary creation of God, which Philo will two hundred years later combine with Platonism and call God’s logos. Ben Sirach’s highest identity of divine Wisdom is a hymn she sings of herself:

I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. I dwelt in high places, and my throne was in the pillar of cloud. Alone I have made the circuit

of the vault of heaven and have walked in the depths of the abyss. In the waves of the sea, in the whole earth and in every people and nation I have gotten a possession (24:3-6).

A Christian scholar might jump to see Trinitarian theology in the making, but Ben Sira is not even considering a messiah (whether Davidic, priestly or otherwise), let alone the hypostases of the Godhead in his treatise. Rather, he makes a contribution which is equally profound. In his expectedly secular treatise on wisdom, he proclaims that following the Law (Torah) is the first and most important act of wisdom (19:20; 15:1). This is a complete transformation of the ancient wisdom texts (cf Prov 4:7). In Proverbs, generically divine Wisdom is made to look Jewish, but Ben Sira sees Jewish Wisdom as having been bestowed on all of humanity! The wisdom within created man then seeks out wisdom as his bride (15:2; 24:19-22), and comes to know God through his primary work, eternal Wisdom (1:4), who in her fullness sought out Israel as her dwelling place in humanity (24:8-12). The Law which has been revealed fully to the people of Israel is the same law which governs all of creation (24:23-29).

For Ben Sira, and later for Philo, this becomes the promise of the covenant between God and his people. Israel is still first-born, but this covenant is somehow open to all of humanity. Man's divine vocation is to bring oneself into communion with the Lord by recognizing the Lord's image and likeness within oneself and by pursuing it outside oneself (6:18-31). Wisdom is immortal, thus as much as wisdom is expressed within the human, the person too can attain (a non-bodily) immortality. As such, this might be loosely described as incarnational theology[4] before the Incarnation!

The Law which Ben Sira and Philo both envision was one of relationships. Each sage will uphold the classic practices of Jewish Law,[5] but Ben Sira prioritizes social relationships throughout his work. One's standing with his family, his wife, his neighbor, and the impoverished are particularly important places in which God's law can be realized, i.e., through which wisdom can be expressed and the Lord can be encountered. Philo's view is less social, but equally participatory in creation: through Philosophy.[6]

Ben Sira's theology is also remarkably doxological. He sees this pursuit of re-union (or *communion*) with the Lord to be a function and display of glory, and the ultimate form of worship offered by the crown jewel of creation: man. An idea with which Ben Sira only flirts (17:1-24; cf his hymns of creation [42:15-43:33], and the ancestors [44:1-50:24]) but which Philo develops remarkably is that this man is a microcosm of all of creation, and as the only bearer of the seal of the logos of God, the only true citizen of the created cosmos.[7] It is this uniqueness of humanity which allows us to return to our place of departure.

Obviously, the incarnation of our Crucified Lord would change everything, revealing the glory of the flesh, and a more complete model of *theosis* than either Ben Sira's or Philo's theology would permit, seeing as they did the eternal Wisdom-Logos existing in a different realm, only through likeness entering into creation, chiefly through the human rational intellect. The self-emptying love displayed through Jesus' willing death on the cross shows that it is no longer outside and above this created order that God is to be met, but entirely within it. We no longer must travel contemplatively or ecstatically through these realms of divine order,[8] but only just

far enough outside the comfortable and seemingly self-fulfilling universe of our own self, to see in another human being the divine seal of God's glory; a complementary microcosm of all of the Lord's creation. And at that very moment, we can accept Jesus' particular incarnation while recognizing the very sublime idea that through our very reception of this good news, the Christ can *and must* be formed within each of us.

So while we join the Magi on the pilgrimage to Bethlehem, let us not fail to marvel in the glory of creation which our Creator wills to save. And let each of us willingly participate in the saving process, so that the labor of the Apostle ends in a glorious birth, both in a small town in Judea and in the Bethlehem of our souls.

[1] Also known as Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, this is one of the books which did not make the final cut for either the Jewish or Protestant Canons. As such, most bibles, including the Oxford Annotated RSV (1977) with which I am working, place this text among the Apocrypha.

[2] The texts function fine in, *and are an accepted part of* the Jewish scriptures, but the point is that they predate them. Consider the pantheon in Job, or the partitioned structure of Proverbs, in which Jewish theology has been overlaid on Egyptian moral maxims (esp Book III) and then accredited to King Solomon.

[3] At this point, I must generally refer to two scholars to whose work I am indebted: John J Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Louisville: WJK, 1997); and Leo Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: WJK, 2007).

[4] "a religion in which man's approach to God is through the physical world rather than by escape from it." Maurice Wiles, "Christianity without Incarnation" in *The Myth of God Incarnate*. John Hick, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

[5] Typically summarized in Second Temple literature by Sabbath observance, circumcision and dietary laws.

[6] Philo, *On the Creation of the Cosmos*, David T Runia, tr. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), §77.

[7] Philo, *On the Creation* §3, 82, 143.

[8] Philo, *On the Creation*, §69-71. This theology has a place in Orthodoxy, as seen in Maximus the Confessor's *Ambiguum 41* and other works of mystical theology. But this only functions in tandem with the very real and participatory experience of the Eucharist.

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Discussion Questions:

What do you make of the Galatians quote that starts this article? Is it odd for Paul to use the image of giving birth to speak about Christ being formed in us? What does it mean to you to have Christ formed in you? What does it mean to the author?

Why do you suppose that Christ chose the specific time, place, and context He did to become incarnate? What meaning can we draw from that context into our own lives?

How has God been born “in the Bethlehem of your soul”? Is this a cooperative process?