

IMMORTALITY AS PRESENCE AND DESTINATION IN THE BOOK OF WISDOM WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON WIS 2,22-23

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Abstract. The article addresses the double aspect of immortality in the Book of Wisdom: immortality as a state and as a goal. I explore the texts where we can grasp the metaphorical structuring that views immortality as presence and destination. The investigation focuses on Wis 2,22-23, then it relates to other relevant texts that complete the reading.

Keywords: immortality, wisdom, metaphor, state, purpose, presence, destination.

Introduction

Is immortality according to the Book of Wisdom something to be achieved by human effort or human being is created immortal provided he does not corrupt that state? The Book of Wisdom² apparently speaks of immortality both as a state of human condition and its purpose. The use of the idiom *ep̄l aḥqarsia* in Wis 2,23 creates problems in understanding because it allows for both possibilities. If both readings are possible, are they coherent? If they are coherent, how do these two aspects relate and function with regards to human life? In this article I would like to enquire into the details of these two aspects of the concept of immortality as both a state of the created being and an end to be achieved.

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² Most of the scholars accept an early Roman dating and an Alexandrian setting of the book. See, among others, David WINSTON, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 43), Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979, 20–25; John J. COLLINS, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (OTL), Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997, 179; Moyna MCGLYNN, *Divine Judgment and Divine Benevolence in the Book of Wisdom* (WUNT2/139), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001, 9–11; Daniel J. HARRINGTON, *Invitation to the Apocrypha*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, 54–57.

The Interpretation of *ep̄l afqarsia|* in Wis 2,23

The second chapter of the Book of Wisdom explores the reasoning of the wicked about life and mortality. The main idea of their speech is that life is short and sorrowful because it is transient and all personal attributes disappear in death. The speech of the wicked is introduced by the narrator's voice who points out that the reasoning of the wicked is false. The concluding remark of the author is that the wicked were led astray (2,21b) because "God created us for incorruption".

kai. ouk egnwsan musthria qeou/
 oude. misqon h̄lpisan osio,thto|
 oude. ekrinan geraj yucwh amwmwn
 ōti o' qeoj ektisen ton anqrwpon ep̄l afqarsia|
 kai. eikona thj idiaj aīdio,thto| epoihsen auton (2,22-23).

And they did not know the secret purposes of God, nor hoped for the wages of holiness, nor discerned the prize for blameless souls; for God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity.³

2,23 extends the idea of 2,22; accordingly, we can understand that incorruption was the Creator's secret purpose for humankind.⁴ The verse is connected with 1,14 (For he created all things in order that they might exist and the generations of the world are salvific), too, explaining that the

³ The translation is taken from the NRSA.

⁴ In 1 Enoch 103,2; Dan 2,27-30.47; 4,6-9ff, too, the doctrine concerning the afterlife is referred to as a mystery. See WINSTON, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 120; Émile PUECH, "The Book of Wisdom and the Dead Sea Scrolls: An Overview," in *The Book of Wisdom in Modern Research: Studies on Tradition, Redaction, and Theology*, ed. Angelo PASSARO and Giuseppe BELLIA (DCLY 2005), Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005, 128. John J. COLLINS, "Apocalyptic Eschatology in Philosophical Dress in the Wisdom of Solomon," in *Shem in the Tents of Japhet: Essays on the Encounter of Judaism and Hellenism*, ed. James L. KUGEL (JSJ.S 74), Leiden: Brill, 2002, 99, notes that, "despite the apocalyptic overtones of the word mystery, however, the book gives no account of angelic revelation such as we find in Enoch or Daniel." See also Michael KOLARCIK, "Sapiential Values and Apocalyptic Imagery in the Wisdom of Solomon," in *Studies in the Book of Wisdom*, ed. Géza G. XERAVITS and József ZSENGELLÉR (JSJ.S 142), Leiden: Brill, 2010, 31, who also mentions that mystery here "refers not to a special knowledge given to a select few," but to the reward of the just.

absolute sense: without beginning or end.¹¹ God’s eternity is obviously a state and not a purpose. The text says that God created us in the image of his eternity. *Eikwn*¹² means image, likeness, or form, appearance. Thus the term denotes representation, but also manifestation; this later can be a “visible manifestation of an invisible and heavenly reality” or “an embodiment or living manifestation of God” (Col 1,15).¹³ Does human being depict or manifest God’s eternity? Man takes part in the life of God, or as Reese says, man receives “a sharing in God’s own ‘eternity.’”¹⁴ The idea is also related to man’s kingship: man as the image of God rules over creation (9,2-3).¹⁵

¹¹ See Ilaria RAMELLI and David KONSTAN, *Terms for Eternity: Aiōnios and Aīdios in Classical and Christian Texts*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007, 48–49. It always refers to God in Wis: man is created in the image of God’s own eternity, wisdom is the reflection of eternal light (fwtōj aiōniou; see 7,26).

¹² Maurice GILBERT, “La relecture de Gn 1–3 dans le Livre de la Sagesse,” in *La création dans l’orient ancien: Congrès de l’ACFEB, Lille (1985)*, ed. Paul BEAUCHAMP et al. (LD 127), Paris: Cerf, 1987, 326–327, and Chrysostome LARCHER, *Le Livre de la Sagesse ou la Sagesse de Salomon*, 3 vols. (*EBib* 2/1, 3, 5), Paris: Gabalda, 1983–1985, 1:267–268, observe that while in Gen 1,27 LXX man is made *kat’ eikōna qeou* in the image of God, here it is made *the image*. See also O. FLENDER, “*eikwn*,” *NIDNTT* 2:287.

¹³ “*eikwn*,” ANLEX, ad loc. See also “*eikwn*,” L&N, ad loc.; “*eikwn*,” *BDAG*, ad loc. Egyptians, Canaanites and Mesopotamians believed that gods manifest themselves through their statues. So the purpose of image was function rather than a description of a deity. See Susan ACKERMAN, “Idol, Idolatry,” *EDB*, 626; E. M. CURTIS, “Image of God,” *ABD* 3:390–391; William H. PROPP, “Graven Image,” *OCB*, 261. CURTIS, *ABD* 3:390–391: the Egyptian understanding of image shows that “man was created in the image of God” has to do with function and position, rather than form.

¹⁴ REESE, *Hellenistic Influence*, 67. Comparing the interpretation on Gen 1–3 in Wis and 4QInstructions, Matthew GOFF, “Adam, the Angels and Eternal Life: Genesis 1–3 in the Wisdom of Solomon and 4QInstruction,” in XERAVITS and ZSENGELLÉR, *Studies in the Book of Wisdom*, 15, says: “The Qumran text contrues the ‘image’ as a sort of heavenly paradigm that influences the creation of one type of humankind, whereas in the Wisdom of Solomon humanity itself was originally created as the divine ‘image,’ a reflection or copy of God’s being.”

¹⁵ FLENDER, *NIDNTT* 2:287.

The other reading is to understand *ep̄l afqarsia|* as a purpose. Verse 2,22 also seems to conceive of immortality as a purpose and not as a state:

kai. ouk egnwsan musthria qeou/
 oude. misqon h̄lpisan osiothtoj
 oude. ekrinan geraj yucwh amwmwn

And they did not know the secret purposes of God, nor hoped for the wages of holiness, nor discerned the prize for blameless souls.

22bc explains 22a: the secrets of God are the “wages of holiness” and “prize for blameless souls.” Because of the nouns *misto|j* and *geraj*, immortality is perceived as an entity the righteous have to strive for, a *reward* and *prize* (2,22bc) for a virtuous life (see also 4,10.14).

The metaphors we analyse in the following section clarify our reading of *ep̄l afqarsia|*. We will see that the two interpretations – immortality as state and immortality as purpose – are not contradictory; the text is not only open to both interpretations, it actually encompasses both.¹⁶

Metaphorical Structures that Define Immortality as State and as Purpose

Several texts understand immortality as a state in Wis, cf. 3,1-9; 5,15. We select one example:

dikaiwn de. yuca. en ceiri. qeou/
 kai. oumh. alyhtai autwh basanoj (3,1).

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them.

¹⁶ John J. COLLINS, “The Mysteries of God: Creation and Eschatology in 4QInstruction and the Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Wisdom and Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Biblical Tradition*, ed. Florentino GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ (BETL 168), Leuven: Leuven University Press – Peeters, 2003, 294: “Immortality was not strictly a reward for righteousness, however. It was the original design of the creator for all humanity.”

The text perceives immortality as presence;¹⁷ the metaphor of presence is extended as presence in the realm of God / with God. This extension, however, since it qualifies presence, it limits immortality to the realm of God. As a consequence, this presence is conditioned: immortality is not inherent in man, but it is the quality of man's communion with God, and as such, it can be attained only by the righteous that lives with wisdom (1,1, 5; 6,12-21; chaps 7–9).¹⁸ This conditioning is underlined by the metaphors that conceive of immortality as the gift of God, as a reward – as we have seen above –, or as the final destination of the righteous.

Salomon's prayer in 7,7 shows that man needs to open up and desire wisdom and only in the communion thus realized becomes immortality man's share. The life that is described as presence with God, thus, includes the notion of arrival: the righteous *arrives* to the state of immortality through symbiosis with wisdom (7:24, 27; chaps. 8-9). And at this moment, immortality is viewed as the goal of human life. Human beings have to desire wisdom and immortality; immortality, however, remains the gift of God (3,13-16; 8,13.17; 16,20-26; 19,21), given from above.¹⁹

¹⁷ We explain the concept of immortality using the discussion on physical life found in George LAKOFF and Mark JOHNSON, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; George LAKOFF and Mark TURNER, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

¹⁸ REESE, *Hellenistic Influence*, 71: the author “was conscious that a distinction had to be made between the relationship of all men to God which springs from human nature itself and that enjoyed only by the just man. On the one hand, God loves all that he created, because otherwise nothing could continue to exist (11.24-25). On the other hand, however, without divine Wisdom man is of no account (9.6).”

¹⁹ As Giuseppe BELLIA and Angelo PASSARO, “Infinite Passion for Justice,” in PASSARO and BELLIA, *The Book of Wisdom in Modern Research*, 318, sums up, “notwithstanding the philosophical terminology adopted, the anthropological vision of Wisdom does not make reference to the Greek concept of dualism but remains anchored in the biblical and Semitic tradition: the immortality of the just person does not derive from the nature of the soul and its pre-existence, as in Plato, because the after-life is given from on high.” REESE, *Hellenistic Influence*, 62–71, stresses the Hellenistic influence on Wis, but immortality stays a gift of God, not the nature of the soul; without God man “remains strictly ‘mortal’ (15.17)” (67). Likewise COLLINS, “The Mysteries of God,” 294, notes that the author of the Book of Wisdom remained Jewish in the idea that “immortality was contingent on righteousness.”

Returning to the idea that σ $\rho\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ $\epsilon\kappa\tau\iota\varsigma\epsilon\upsilon\varsigma$ $\tau\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ $\alpha\eta\tau\epsilon\omega\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ $\epsilon\pi\lambda$ $\alpha\iota\tau\alpha\rho\sigma\iota\alpha\lambda$ we should, therefore, understand that immortality is “not a quality of man’s nature as such but rather something outside of him, a result of divine power.”²⁰ The text provides us with other instances of immortality conceived as the gift of God that speak of the gifts given in the desert, manna and water. In the following passages, wisdom is associated with manna:

$\alpha\eta\lambda\lambda$ $\omega\upsilon\tau$ $\alpha\gamma\gamma\epsilon\lambda\omega\upsilon\tau$ $\tau\rho\omicron\upsilon\tau\eta\upsilon$ $\epsilon\upsilon\omega\mu\iota\sigma\alpha\iota$ $\tau\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ $\lambda\alpha\omicron\upsilon$ $\sigma\omicron\upsilon$
 $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\epsilon\lambda\tau\omicron\iota\mu\omicron\upsilon\upsilon$ $\alpha\rho\tau\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ $\alpha\pi\lambda$ $\omicron\upsilon\alpha\rho\alpha\upsilon\omicron\upsilon$ / $\rho\alpha\epsilon\sigma\epsilon\chi$ $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\iota\iota$ $\alpha\kappa\omicron\pi\iota\alpha\tau\omega\iota$
 $\rho\alpha\varsigma\alpha\upsilon$ $\eta\delta\omicron\upsilon\eta\eta$ $\iota\sigma\upsilon\pi\omicron\upsilon\tau\alpha$
 $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\rho\rho\omicron\upsilon$ $\rho\alpha\varsigma\alpha\upsilon$ $\alpha\rho\mu\omicron\iota\omicron\upsilon$ $\gamma\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\iota\upsilon$ (16,20).

Instead of these things 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.

This manna is not only to quench physical hunger,²¹ it is the “food of angels,” or as 19,21 calls it, $\gamma\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ $\alpha\mu\beta\rho\sigma\iota\alpha\iota$ $\tau\rho\omicron\upsilon\tau\eta\iota$ (a kind of heavenly food).²² In the Exodus account of the Book of Wisdom (chaps. 11-19),

²⁰ REESE, *Hellenistic Influence*, 66. He also goes on to say that “in contrast to Plato, the Sage never applies the term immortality to man or the human soul. It always designates something that happens to man, some aspect of his relationship to God or to divine Wisdom or to moral integrity. Immortality for man is not a quality of his nature as such but of a particular condition . . . its origin is God, who bestows it only upon the just and the wise” (*Hellenistic Influence*, 64). REESE, *Hellenistic Influence*, 65, also notes that the Book of Wisdom “shows closer kinship with the Stoic teaching that man’s happiness comes from the enjoyment of common citizenship with the gods in the universe.” See also André-Jean FESTUGIÈRE, *Le Dieu cosmique*, vol. 2 of *La révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste (EBib)*, Paris: Librairie Lecoffre; Gabalda et Cie, 1949, 270–277; Cornelis BENNEMA, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel (WUNT 2/148)*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002, 61–62.

²¹ Cf. John 6,27.

²² Paul BEAUCHAMP, “Le salut corporel des justes et la conclusion du livre de la Sagesse,” *Bib* 45 (1964) 491–526, 509: *ambrosial* refers to “food conferring immortality” to gods. REESE, *Hellenistic Influence*, 70: “by comparing the biblical manna to ambrosia he [the author] presents it as a type of the divine gift that alone” ensures immortality. Reese also notes that $\rho\alpha\varsigma\alpha\upsilon$ $\eta\delta\omicron\upsilon\eta\eta$ $\iota\sigma\upsilon\pi\omicron\upsilon\tau\alpha$ (16,20c) describes the manna as “the food of angels” that is suited for every taste, thus referring to the righteous’ eternal happiness (*Hellenistic Influence*, 69). See also

manna becomes the food of immortality.²³ And as the text says, this happened that the righteous may know that it is not the daily bread that feeds humankind, but the word of God that gives immortality: *al|a. to rhma, sou touj soi. pisteuontaj diathrei/* (16,26c).²⁴ Thus, in Wis' recounting the Exodus event gets eschatological connotation: wisdom provides people with the *bread* of immortality from heaven; she becomes the manna.²⁵ Wisdom also gives water in the desert:

ediylhsan kai. epekalesanto, se
 kai. edoqh autoij
 ek petraj akrotomou
 upwr
 kai.
 iama diyhj
 ek liqou sklhrrou/(11,4).

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

Due to the eschatological dimension of the Exodus experience, it appears that the water provided in 11,4 also points beyond earthly water to

Tobias NICKLAS, “‘Food of Angels’ (Wis 16,20),” in XERAVITS and ZSENGELLÉR, *Studies in the Book of Wisdom*, 83–100.

²³ See BEAUCHAMP, “Le salut,” 508–509. Wis 16,26 makes clear that manna points to something else, not just the Exodus story, but, in the words of Ben WITHERINGTON, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994, 376, to a “larger verity,” i.e. God and eternal life.

²⁴ See REESE, *Hellenistic Influence*, 69; József ZSENGELLÉR, “‘The Taste of Paradise’: Interpretation of Exodus and Manna in the Book of Wisdom,” in XERAVITS and ZSENGELLÉR, *Studies in the Book of Wisdom*, 206–216.

²⁵ MCGLYNN, *Divine Judgment*, 198–199, enumerates the similarities between manna and wisdom. Manna is a gift of God just like wisdom (16,25; cf. 8,21). They both give knowledge (16,26; cf. 7,22-25); their function in sustaining the creation is similar (16,21; cf. 8,1; 7,28). Manna is imperishable similarly to wisdom (16,22; cf. 7,24.26). Furthermore; they both have “preserving quality” (16,26; cf. 7,27-28; 8,17). ZSENGELLÉR, “‘The Taste of Paradise,’” 216, however, notes that “the author of the Book of Wisdom makes a very fine distinction not to use this direct allegory.” He further concludes that wisdom is presented as “*the taste of paradise*” since it provides people “the opportunity of immortality” (“The Taste of Paradise,” 216).

wisdom and immortality. McGlynn²⁶ links the passage to 7,7, where the same prayer brings wisdom and her gifts to Solomon, and 6,12-20, which emphasizes the importance of training that Israel experiences during the Exodus: “Deuteronomy’s description of abundance in the Promised Land becomes in Wisdom, because of the promise contained in the sorites,²⁷ the first steps along a road which has as its destination an immortal kingdom reached by discipline and training.”²⁸ With this, we have arrived to the metaphor of journey where life appears as a journey and our purposes in life are seen as destinations.²⁹ Immortality is viewed as a destination for the righteous that is walking on the path of righteousness (11,1-2ff; cf. 5,7):

kai. ou[tw]j diwrqwqhsan ai' triboi twh epi. ghj
 kai. ta. aresta, sou edidacqhsan anqrwpoi
 kai. th/ sofia| eswqhsan (9,18).

And thus the paths of those on earth were set right, and people were taught what pleases you, and were saved by wisdom.

A small note before we conclude the article, the righteous already reaches the destination of spiritual immortality on earth through the communion with wisdom who makes him the child of God (2,13.16.18). The fulfillment of this state comes after death, when the righteous is lifted up to the realm of God:

euarestoj qew/ genomenoj hgaphqh
 kai. zwh metaxu. amartwlwh meteteqh (4,10).

There were some who pleased God and were loved by him, and while living among sinners were taken up.

²⁶ MCGLYNN, *Divine Judgment*, 182–184.

²⁷ The so-called sorites are 6,17-20, a chain of conclusions that describe the way from the desire for instruction to immortality [reference added by R. I. Valentin.]

²⁸ MCGLYNN, *Divine Judgment*, 184. Note that MCGLYNN, *Divine Judgment*, 182–183, follows LARCHER, *Le Livre*, 3:656, in saying that Wis’ account of water from the rock is based on Deut 8,1-16 and not Num 20,6 or Exod 17,4.

²⁹ LAKOFF and TURNER, *More than Cool Reason*, 3.

Immortality is conceived as the essential characteristic of the relationship between God and the righteous: the righteous pleases God and God loves him, therefore he takes him up to the domain of eternity.³⁰ Immortality is, thus, a relational concept in the Book of Wisdom: man was created in the image of God's eternity, but this affinity with God only comes into life in the dynamics of the relationship with God.³¹

Conclusion

To conclude, immortality in the Book of Wisdom can be interpreted as both state and purpose. The two readings are not only coherent but they complete each other. The metaphors that view immortality as presence and destination show different aspects of the concept of immortality. We could also say that there is a double perspective on immortality in Wis, where 2,23 is the perspective of God, while 2,22 describes the perspective of man who strives for immortality. From God's perspective immortality is a present state in the sense of God's permanently available gift for all, whereas from man's perspective, who prays to God in order to get wisdom (chaps. 7-9), it is a goal that can be reached through wisdom. Winston describes these two perspectives with regard to wisdom's presence in human life and his conclusion is similar: "From the human viewpoint, the Divine Wisdom enters man and departs; from the eternal perspective of God, however, it is ever present to man, though its consummation in any particular case is conditioned by the fitness of the recipient."³²

³⁰ It could appear that God only loved the righteous because he pleased him, but having a look at 11,24 that states the unconditional love of God for creation, we can understand that 4,10 emphasizes the reciprocity in the love-relation between God and the righteous.

³¹ Discussing Sir 17,3, Martin HENGEL, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, trans. John BOWDEN, rev. ed., 2 vols., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981, 1:149, says that "being in the image of God (17.3) did not yet mean identity of being; man was above all directed towards God's mercy (18.11-14)."

³² WINSTON, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 41–42.