

Exploring the Seven 'Wisdom Books'

By MSGR. JOSIAH G. CHATHAM

A certain grouping of books, in Catholic editions of the Bible, is called the Wisdom Books, or the sapiential books.

The seven Wisdom Books usually occur in the following order: Job, Psalms, Proverbs (of Solomon), Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), Song of Songs (Canticle of Canticles or Song of Solomon), Wisdom (of Solomon), Ecclesiasticus (Sirach, or Wisdom of Sirach). Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus are not in the Hebrew canon which lists the other books among "the Writings."

The literary model for wisdom literature is found in the ancient royal court of Egypt. It consisted of instructions about life and conduct, handed down from teacher to student as part of courtly education. Solomon was greatly influenced by Egyptian ideals and this helps explain why most of the Wisdom Books are attributed to Solomon, the prototype of wise men.

The Wisdom Books of the Bible reflect the insights which were handed down within the Jewish family from generation to generation. One is impressed with the earthiness of the general approach in which "the good life" serves as a common denominator between observance of the law and the pursuit of wisdom. In the wide-ranging collections of moral maxims, an overall divine order can be seen guiding the sayings of the wise men.

Job, Psalms and the Song of Songs are really three distinctive literary types.

The Book of Job may have been written during the exile or in the period shortly after the return. It is a poetic dialogue in the setting of a prose narrative. It expounds a theology of suffering in the life of the just man, framed and phrased in terms of literary genius. The over-simplified theological position that all suffering in the life of man is the

work of God's retributive justice, gives way, in this book to the element of mystery, present in suffering. Job is the Old Testament presentation of the "theology of Gethsemane".

The 150 Psalms which make up that book were composed over a period of 800-900 years. When they are called the "Psalms of David" it is in a sense similar to that in which the Pentateuch is ascribed to Moses and the Wisdom Books to Solomon. Many of the Psalms bear a title such as "to the choir master. Psalm of David." The titles are not part of the inspired text. In many instances, they remain a mystery to scholars.

The Psalms have a cultic orientation. They were songs which were probably created by temple singers who entered bear a title such as "To the king, cultic leader or worshippers, for whom they composed.

About thirty-five are "hymns of praise" forty-three are "psalms of lament," about thirteen are "thanksgiving psalms," about nine are "royal psalms," about ten are "wisdom psalms," in the sense that they share characteristics of wisdom literature. Two other groups are the "liturgy psalms" and the "historical psalms." Some also give special groupings to "enthronement psalms."

The psalms, composed over a period of hundreds of years, give a panoramic view of Old Testament doctrine and experience. They run the full scale of personal attitudes and feeling towards God. The sentiments expressed in the psalms contain the material of undying poetry and prayer, though this is not always captured in translation.

Proverbs is the earliest of the Wisdom Books. In its present form, the book probably dates from the fifth century. Wisdom offers men salvation and happiness here and now. The Israelite sage of this period did not yet have a clear idea of life after death. God's revelation was a gradual on-going

process.

The Book of Ecclesiastes was written between 500 and 150 B.C. The word "ecclesiastes" has been translated as meaning the "preacher" or "leader of the assembly," whose pen name was "Qoheleth." The book brings together wisdom sayings on a wide variety of subjects. A certain cynicism and pessimism resolve in a philosophy which might be summed up in the expression "thank God for little favors and enjoy the simple things of life."

The Song of Songs was probably written after the exile. It is a group of songs of love be-

tween a man and woman. Human love is a type of the love of Yaweh for his people. The love songs are arranged as a dialogue. Engaged couples and husbands and wives could read the dialogue to each other, recalling that their love for each other is precious in the eyes of God and can be a means of growth in holiness.

The Book of Wisdom, though attributed to Solomon, was written in Greek and was the last of the Old Testament books. The doctrine of immortality which is developed here had not received explicit formulation in the earlier Old Testa-

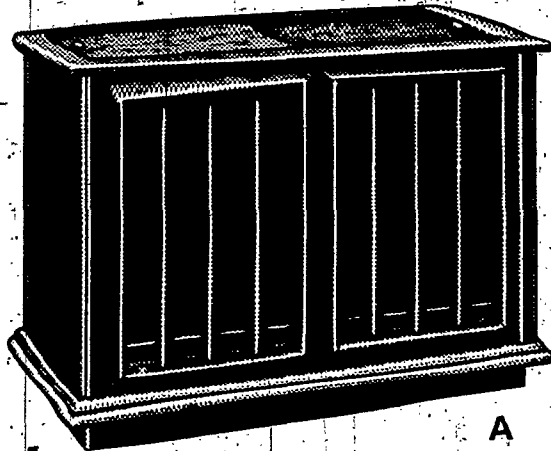
ment books. The author of Wisdom uses the Greek understanding of a real distinction between body and soul which was foreign to Hebrew thought. God's wisdom is personified, thus opening the way to Saint Paul's treatment of Christ as the "wisdom of the Father."

Ecclesiasticus was written by a certain "ben Sira," or "Sirach," around the year 180 B.C. The book was a defense of the religious and cultural heritage of the Jews. Sirach wished to show that Jewish wisdom did not take second place to the wisdom of the Greeks. It contains many quotable maxims.

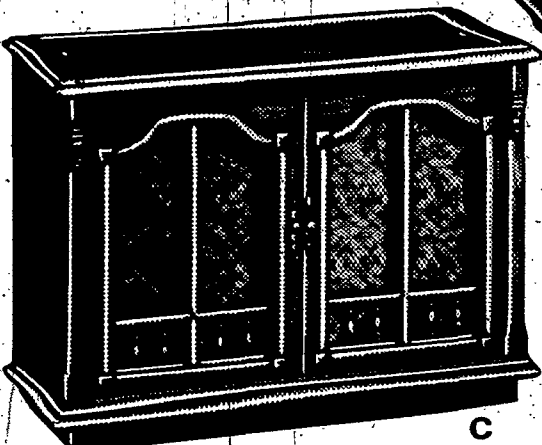
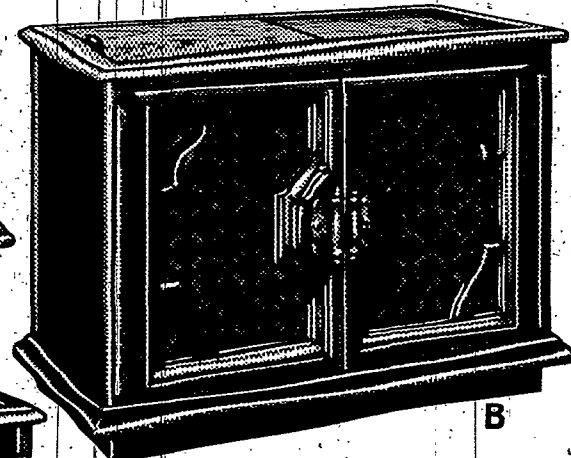
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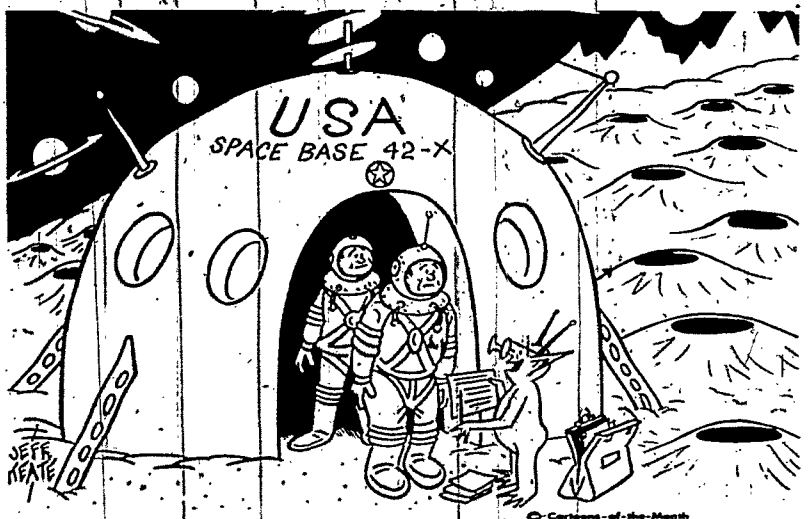
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Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD MCBRIEN

Q. If a person commits no serious sin, is it necessary for him to go to Confession—ever? I know that one can receive Holy Communion if free from mortal sin, and I attend Mass and receive Communion at least twice a week. I have a hearing difficulty, and Confession was always a bit of an ordeal because of this. I realize that, as a sacrament, Penance confers grace, but is it obligatory to go if one has no serious sin?

A. Many Catholics confuse the obligation to receive Holy Communion once a year with the obligation to receive the sacrament of Penance. The Church requires at least yearly Communion (Lateran Council IV), but there is no comparable requirement for yearly Confession. The sacrament of Penance is required before the reception of Holy Communion only when the penitent is aware of serious sin (Council of Trent).



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