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Solomon's Wisdom

I Kings 3—4; II Chronicles 1:1-17

a Solomon Asks for Wisdom (I Kings 3:1-9)

“Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

—I Kings 3:9

As final evidence of the glory of Solomon's kingdom from its inception, the writer of I Kings stressed that even Egypt hastened to ensure neighborly relations with Israel. Marriages between royal families in the ancient Middle East were calculated political alliances—affairs of state rather than affairs of the heart. The pharaohs prior to Solomon's era had never married their daughters to non-Egyptians, but the relative weakness of Egypt had made these political marriages necessary. It must have galled Egyptian royalty to need a treaty with a nation they once enslaved. Under these circumstances, Solomon established an alliance with Egypt by marrying the daughter of the Pharaoh (vs. 1a).

Solomon did not house his exotic new bride in the palace of David. The tent housing the ark of the covenant was in the royal compound, and Solomon did not think his Egyptian princess should live in proximity to the ark (see II Chron. 8:11). Accordingly, he housed her somewhere in the old part of Jerusalem until he could build her a palace (I Kings 3:1b). It appears that Solomon married the Egyptian princess before the temple project began in the fourth year of his reign (see 6:1). The palace complex plus the temple were completed in 20 years (see 6:38; 7:1, 8; 9:10), so the princess spent at least 16 years in these temporary quarters.

The Pharaoh gave Solomon the Canaanite city of Gezer as his daughter's dowry (see 9:16). Gezer guarded the road between the Mediterranean port city Joppa and Jerusalem. Removing this stubborn Canaanite menace made transporting building materials for the temple and his palace easier and certainly more secure for Solomon. This dowry of Gezer may have removed the final impediment to beginning construction on the temple.

Did Solomon's marriage to

Pharaoh's daughter signal the beginning of his spiritual decline? Interpreters disagree and an ancient Jewish tradition asserts that she became a convert to the Israelite religion. If she influenced Solomon toward idolatry, it probably was later in his reign. In these early years, he seems to have guarded his heart against spiritual compromise.

Ask Yourself . . . *Where am I most susceptible to spiritual compromise?*

The writer of Kings was concerned about the spiritual danger of decentralized worship at various high places in the absence of a temple (3:2). Israel was forbidden to worship on hilltops and housetops,

The ruins of an ancient high place in northern Israel. God's people wrongly worshiped at high places scattered throughout the land from time to time.



which the Canaanites had used as worship sites (see Num. 33:52). Israelites were to worship only at the site God designated (see Deut. 12:3-7). But worship on high places developed in Israel with the participation of godly men such as Samuel (see I Sam. 9:12-14). David confused the situation further by bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and leaving the tabernacle in Gibeon (see II Chron. 1:3-5).

The multiplicity of high places indicated that there needed to be a temple built in honor of "the Name of the LORD" (I Kings 3:2). If His glory and character were to be preserved, Solomon needed to build the temple. Even the king, who loved the Lord intensely and obeyed Him as loyally as David had, worshiped at the high places (vs. 3). Once the temple was built, there would be no reason to worship at the high places.

Evidently the tabernacle was at Gibeon (see II Chron. 1:3) because

Gibeon was the most important high place (I Kings 3:4).

The writer of Kings didn't even mention the tabernacle and the bronze altar when he reported that Solomon lavished 1,000 burnt offerings on the Lord at Gibeon. He focused on

Solomon's love for the Lord and the Lord's response to that love. God appeared to Solomon in a dream and promised him anything he requested (vs. 5).

From Solomon's dream we see how saturated in covenant thought he was. Solomon dreamed about the kindness of God to his father, David, and the extension of that same kindness into his reign (vs. 6). He dreamed of his personal inadequacy to bear the responsibility of governing the extensive realm God had given David. His heart's desire—even in his dreams—was to be wise enough to govern God's great people justly (vss. 7-9).

Ask Yourself . . . *If God offered to give me anything I wanted, what would I ask for?*

b God Gives Solomon Wisdom (I Kings 3:10-15)

"I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be."

—I Kings 3:12

The Lord was glad that Solomon responded unselfishly and responsibly (vs. 10). The young king's focus was on his role as the guardian of the covenant God had made with His nation Israel and as the heir of

the promises God had made to his father, David. The conditional wording of verses 11 and 12, "Since you have asked for this and not for [that] . . . , I will do what you have asked," does not mean the Lord would not have granted a spiritually inferior request. The wording indicates the Lord's pleasure in granting wisdom to Solomon.

The Lord said that Solomon's heart would be wise and discerning. The Hebrew concept of the "heart" (vs. 12) does not convey emotions as the word does in English; according to Hebrew thought, emotions flowed from the bowels. Nor can the heart be solely equated with the brain, the center of rational thought. Solomon's "heart," in this context, included his mind and his will.

God granted Solomon wisdom and discernment. Wisdom is the knowledge of how life works and skill in making use of that knowledge for the benefit of everyone involved. Wisdom is the application of knowledge, and obedience is the application of wisdom. Discernment is the ability to recognize the true nature of things and to distinguish one thing from another.

Ask Yourself . . . *In what areas of my life do I need more wisdom and discernment?*

According to the Lord's assessment, no one before had been Solomon's equal in wisdom and discernment, and no one would be in the future (vs. 12). In many ways Solomon foreshadowed the greater

GOD SPOKE THROUGH DREAMS

The Old Testament records several examples of divine revelation through dreams. Unlike pagan sources that abound in dreams, the Bible always regards revelatory dreams as unusual occurrences. Sometimes they had to be interpreted by a man of God, as in the case of Pharaoh's and Nebuchadnezzar's dreams (Gen. 41:25-32; Dan. 2:27, 28). Most often Old Testament dreams were like night visions in which God spoke plainly to people who responded plainly to Him.

Son of David, Jesus Christ. Jesus could say, "The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here" (Matt. 12:42). Only the Messiah would demonstrate more wisdom than Solomon.

God rewarded Solomon with personal wealth and honor precisely because he did not request them (I Kings 3:13). The king showed he was prepared to handle riches and prestige by valuing them less

than wisdom and discernment. His divinely augmented wisdom and discernment gave Solomon even more perspective on the additional blessings God would provide.

The Lord promised Solomon greater wealth and honor than any other living king. It's hard to imagine, but 3,000 years ago there was a stronger king on David's throne in Jerusalem than in Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, India, or even China.

The Lord conditioned the length of Solomon's life on his obedience to the Lord and his "decrees" and "commands," which David had consistently observed (vs. 14). While David lived to be 70, Solomon died at 60 (see II Sam. 5:4; I Kings 11:42). Though both reigned 40 years, Solomon's life may have been shorter than his father's because Solomon slipped and drifted away from his initial commitment to God.

When Solomon realized his encounter with the Lord had been a dream (3:15ab), he did not dismiss the promises as the product of his imagination or digestion. He recognized this dream as an authoritative message from God, and he hurried back to Jerusalem, where "the ark of the Lord's covenant" was and made additional offerings there.

These offerings probably were the fellowship offerings of Leviticus 7:11-17 that celebrated the gratitude of the offerer for God's activity in his life. All of the officials of Solomon's court joined him in a feast thanking God for investing the young king with great wisdom and

discernment (I Kings 3:15c). The feast would have consisted of the animals offered in the fellowship offerings.

C Solomon Demonstrates Supernatural Wisdom (I Kings 3:16-28)

When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice. —I Kings 3:28

The time of the incident involving the two prostitutes who claimed the same baby must have been early in Solomon's reign because it helped establish his reputation for wisdom (vs. 28). Solomon evidently at times held open court when ordinary citizens could bring their complaints to him. Two prostitutes who shared a house gave birth to sons a few days apart. One night one of the women accidentally smothered her son and switched the corpse for the other baby. Now the mothers were disputing whose son remained alive (vss. 16-22). Apparently there were no witnesses to the incident.

Solomon exercised discernment and wisdom in his ruling. He needed to distinguish between a mother's regard for her son and a selfish woman's desire not to lose

MADAM INNKEEPER

Prostitution seems to have been practiced though unlawful in Israel. Since mostly men traveled, the connection between brothels and public inns was so strong that the Hebrew word for "prostitute" could also mean "innkeeper."

The two prostitutes who appeared before Solomon may have lost their customers as their pregnancies advanced. Consequently, there were probably no witnesses on the fateful night of the one baby boy's death.

having a child. He needed wisdom to devise a means of eliciting revealing responses from the women. He chose to order the child's execution to see how each woman would respond (vss. 23-25).

One can ask whether Solomon's scheme revealed the actual biological mother or the woman who was more fit to mother him regardless of their biological relationship. The writer of Kings had no doubt that Solomon used his wisdom and discernment to find the biological mother (vs. 26).

It's interesting that this brief story from I Kings 3 is one of the best-

known incidents in the Old Testament. Almost everyone knows that King Solomon showed his unusual wisdom by proposing to cut a baby in two to reveal that the protective woman was the true mother. This incident still reveals that God did something unusual for Solomon so he could administer justice among God's people (vss. 27, 28).

Ask Yourself . . . Would my best friend call me wise? Why or why not?

I Kings 4:1-28 in Brief

Solomon revealed his wisdom as a court administrator by means of the governmental systems he established that made his regime more efficient and successful than his father's. First Kings 4:1-6 lists the officials who reported directly to King Solomon about primary areas of life in the kingdom.

First Kings 4:7-19 lists 12 district governors and briefly outlines their territories. The territories apparently exclude Judah and in many cases do not line up with the original tribal territories. Each district provided the massive and diverse amounts of food necessary for the court and for the royal chariot horses. Part of later resentment against Judah by the other tribes of Israel may stem from perceived favoritism in this system.

Israel flourished and grew under Solomon's reign. His territory stretched from the Euphrates River in the northeast to the border with

Egypt on the southwest. Much of this land belonged to subject nations such as Syria, Moab, Ammon, Edom, and Philistia, which paid heavy annual tribute to Israel.

d Solomon's Wisdom Gains Renown (I Kings 4:29-34)

From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

—I Kings 4:34

Solomon had asked for a discerning heart so that he could administer justice to the people of Israel. Solomon's wisdom was "as measureless as the sand on the seashore" (vs. 29). The Bible elsewhere uses the sand on the seashore to describe an innumerable population, a vast amount of grain, and an overwhelming weight of anguish (see vs. 20; Gen. 41:49; Job. 6:3). As applied to Solomon, the analogy seems to point to the enormous depth of his wisdom.

Solomon's wisdom outstripped that of the two traditional centers of wisdom in the ancient Middle East. He was wiser than the sages of Mesopotamia, called "the East," and wiser than the scholars of Egypt (I Kings 4:30). Both Mesopotamia and Egypt produced volumes of proverbs and extensive bodies of literature, largely of a mythological

nature. Solomon outshone them all.

He was more renowned than other wise men in Israel. Ethan the Ezrahite and Heman both have one of their psalms in the Bible (see Pss. 88, 89). Ethan, Heman, Calcol, and Darda all are named as prominent descendants of one of Judah's sons in I Chronicles 2:6. Evidently their claim to fame rested in their unusual wisdom, which in turn was dwarfed by that of Solomon (I Kings 4:31).

Of Solomon's 3,000 proverbs (vs. 32), 582 appear in the biblical Book of Proverbs. Of his 1,005 songs, the Song of Solomon and Psalm 72 in the Bible. When the Bible says Solomon described plants, from the largest tree to the smallest herb, it may imply lengthy botanical catalogs and royal gardens to preserve

specimens of each. Mesopotamian libraries and archives report both were common royal projects. Solomon's interest in animals, birds, reptiles, and fish echoes from certain of his proverbs based on the habits of various creatures (vs. 33; see Prov. 6:6-8; 26:2, 3, 11; 27:8; 28:1, 15).

A Royal Garden

Solomon's botanical studies may have been conducted in his own royal gardens. Walled royal gardens became popular in Babylon about 1200 B.C. when an obscure emperor erected the predecessor to Nebuchadnezzar's famous Hanging Gardens (about 600 B.C.). Tiglath-pileser constructed a lavish garden in Nineveh around 1100 B.C. that lasted until the city fell in 605 B.C. Calah, near Nineveh, also boasted an elaborate walled botanical garden by 800 B.C.

Solomon's wisdom pursued avenues eagerly traveled by many curious minds.



The stone vaults of the Hanging Gardens allowed Nebuchadnezzar to grow many different kinds of trees.

Because Solomon excelled the sages of the traditional sources of wisdom, monarchs from around the Middle East sent emissaries to his court to profit from hearing and observing his wisdom (I Kings 4:34). The most famous example of such a visit is that by the Queen of Sheba, who insisted Solomon's reputation didn't begin to do justice to his wisdom and his wealth (see 10:1-10).

Ask Yourself . . . *Who can I count on as a source of discernment when I need advice and guidance in my life?*

II Chronicles 1:1-17 in Brief

The narrative in this chapter parallels I Kings 3 with the addition of the information that the tabernacle and the bronze altar were at the

high place of Gibeon (II Chron. 1:3-5). The Chronicler did not mention Solomon's further sacrifices before the ark when he returned from Gibeon to Jerusalem. He stressed the unity and completeness of Solomon's extravagant worship and God's extravagant gift of wisdom there at Gibeon.

In response to the Lord's added promise to Solomon of wealth, the Chronicler inserted a paragraph about how many chariots and horses Solomon added to his army, how common silver and gold became during his reign, and how Israel became the prosperous go-between in the commerce of horses and chariots among the nations of the Middle East (vss. 14-17). The same information appears in a later spot in I Kings (10:26-29).