

SOLOMON THE WISE

I Kings 3: 16-28 & 4: 29-34

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REVIEW

The 100 year period known as the “Time of the Judges” ended in about 1020 BCE. Samson died and the twelve tribes of Israel exploded into civil war. While they were killing each other, the Philistines, whom Samson had devastated, returned to power and, in 1050 invaded Judah, destroyed the temple in the city of Shiloh and sacked about a dozen other Israelite and Canaanite cities.

Tired of fighting each other and in need of a leader to unite them against the Philistines, the people went to the prophet, Samuel, and asked him to intercede with God on their behalf and ask for a king to unite and lead them. God’s answer was to give them the king they sought and his name was Saul.

Saul was chosen, however, not because he was good king material but because he was taller and better looking than any other man in Israel – or so we are told. He was also not exactly the brightest bulb in the house, if you know what I mean.

Just by way of example, on the day he was anointed king, he was working in his parents’ fields and Samuel called him out of the fields and announced to him that he was called by God to be the king and unite the twelve tribes of Israel. He made Saul get down on his knees and he poured oil on his head and said some things and prayed and then said, “Okay, you are now the king of Israel.”

Saul said, “Okay,” and started to go back to the field to finish the plowing.

Samuel had to stop him. “No, no. You can’t do that. You have to come with me and start doing king stuff, now. You have to levy taxes and raise an army to fight off the Philistines. Then you have to build a palace and have a harem and make some sons and expand the borders and subjugate the foreigners and punish the wicked and decide among the people ... well, all the stuff that kings do.”

So Saul shrugged and followed Samuel and proceeded to unite the kingdom with Samuel as his mentor.

He would be successful in that effort, though the Philistines would continue to be a thorn in his side throughout his eight year reign. And, during the last couple of years of his kingship, after the death of Samuel, he would be troubled with mental illness (what, today we would call bi-polar disorder or “manic depression”) and migraine headaches. He would also be troubled by a young upstart warrior with designs on his throne, a kid named David.

The United Kingdom would last for about 100 years under three kings.

The first, Saul, reigned for eleven years. (1020 – 1009 BCE)¹

The second, David, reigned for forty years. (1009 – 969 BCE)

The third, Solomon, reigned for forty years. (969 – 929 BCE)

Two summers ago I spent the entire summer telling the stories of Saul and David so I’m not going to re-walk that path this summer. Instead, we’re going to jump ahead about sixty years to Solomon.

SOLOMON BECOMES KING

Solomon was the second son of David and Bathsheba. Their first child, you will recall, died soon after he was born and his death was interpreted as a sign of God’s displeasure over their affair and David’s plot to have Bathsheba’s husband killed in battle.

Solomon stands beside his father as the two men who led Israel during the highest point in her history and the pinnacle of her success. They were, however, very different men.

David was a scrapper, a fighter, a warrior who won his throne through hard fought battles and managed to hold onto it by cunning and ruthlessness. He was a man of the people, a shepherd boy who could kill with a sling and write poetry to make you weep, who was known for his beautiful singing voice as well as his keen intellect. He captured Jerusalem and made it his capitol and then danced before the Ark of the Covenant when it was brought into the city.

Solomon seems to have been a more aloof and intellectual figure. Raised in the palace as a member of the elite aristocracy, he was well educated and cared for all of his life. While many ancient writings bear his name most scholars, today, agree that it is probably because he was responsible for having them written and/or collected rather than writing them himself.

He was not without his own ruthless side, however. And even if he had been, his mother was always beside him to offer encouragement and help.

When David was old and in what were clearly his final days, his oldest son, Adonijah made a bid for the throne with the support of Joab, his father’s nephew and commander of the army, and Abiathar, one of the two high priests. When Bathsheba heard of the plot, she went to Nathan, the prophet who had advised David for most of his life, and the two of them went to David and pled Solomon’s case.

¹ When dating Old Testament events and people, all dates are approximate. Scholars differ but most put the reigns of Israel’s kings within 3-5 years of the dates given here.

David agreed to anoint Solomon as his successor, immediately. Solomon was taken upon the royal mule to the Spring of Gihon in the Kidron valley where Nathan anointed him with oil, trumpets were blown and riders were sent out in all directions to announce that Solomon was to be the new king.

A few days later, David gave Solomon his personal blessing and some fatherly advice and, a few days after that, David died. The king is dead; long live the king.

SOLOMON TAKES THE THRONE

Though Solomon was a young man, probably only in his early twenties when he took the throne, he proved himself, immediately, to be as ruthless and cunning as his father. He realized that those who had opposed him as king would never be loyal to him and this was proved to be the case within just a few months of his ascendancy to the throne.

His older half-brother, Adonijah, had been spared from any repercussions for trying to seize the throne before David's death, but shortly after Solomon became king, Adonijah went to Bathsheba and asked for the hand of the late king's favorite concubine, a pretty young girl named Abishag of Shunam, who had cared for David as he was dying.

To take as your wife a woman from the household of the dead king, especially his favorite concubine, would have been seen by everyone in the country as a blatant claim on the throne. Solomon realized that Abiathar was never going to let it go so he dispatched the captain of his bodyguard, Benaiah, to kill him, which he did.

Since Joab had backed Adonijah, Benaiah was also sent to deal with him. Joab fled to a local temple sanctuary and Benaiah was reluctant to spill blood in such a holy place and decided to wait until Joab eventually came out. Solomon reminded him, however, that it was Joab who had killed Abner, another army general, against David's wishes. He also reminded him that when Absalom, David's favorite son, led a rebellion against his father, David had given strict orders that, in the final battle, Absalom's life was to be spared. Joab ignored those orders and killed Absalom in cold blood. Joab was a warrior who had given no quarter and asked for none and he deserved none now.

Benaiah entered the temple and killed Joab beside the altar.

Abiathar, the high priest who had backed Adonijah's bid for the throne was spared because of his station as high priest but was banished to the little village of Anathoth to live out his days in isolation.

There was one last little piece of unfinished business, a man named Shimei, an old Benjaminite man who had cursed David as the king fled from Absalom's rebel army years ago. David, when he came back to power after the death of Absalom, had ordered the old man's life to be spared but the order was given that he was confined to the city of Jerusalem. The order of protection, however, did not extend beyond the city. If he ever left, his life would be forfeit.

Apparently, Shimei thought that the house arrest in Jerusalem ended with David's death so he left the city to go to the Philistine city of Gath to chase down two escaped slaves. When he returned, Solomon's guards were waiting for him and he was put to death.

Having now tied up all of his loose ends, Solomon settled in to become king.

SOLOMON THE WISE

His first act was to go on a religious retreat to Gibeon, a small temple about six miles from Jerusalem. We are told that he made a thousand burnt offerings to God while he was there.

One night he had a dream in which God came to him and offered to grant him one wish. What was his heart's desire? Solomon replied that he was a very young man, unwise in the skills of leadership. "Give me, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, so that I may discern between good and evil." (I Kings 3: 9)

God noted that he might have asked for long life, riches, or triumph over his enemies but because he asked for wisdom, he would be given these others as well.

Solomon is noted for the wisdom and discernment with which he reigned but one story is always held up as the perfect example of his discerning nature:

Since David's reign, the king always set aside one day of the week as "Judgment Day" when he would hear civil cases and anyone in the land could come before him for judgment.

One judgment day two prostitutes came before Solomon. They lived together in the same house and had both given birth to sons in the same week. One of the children died when his mother rolled over on him in her sleep. She then claimed that the living child was hers.

The women asked King Solomon to decide fairly which woman was the child's true mother.

After a moment's thought he ordered the royal sword to be brought to him and the child to be set on the floor between the two women. Holding the sword over the child, he declared that he would cleave the child in half and each woman would be given half of the child.

One of the women sneered and said, "Fine. If I can't have the child, no one can."

The other begged the king to stop. “No, please. Let the child live. Better that he should live with this other woman than that he should die, here.”

Solomon knew, then, which woman was the child’s true mother. The one who was willing to give the child away rather than see him killed was the child’s mother and he gave the child to her.

News of this wise judgment, and others like it, spread throughout the land, we are told, and Solomon’s rule and fame were firmly established.

“Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men,” the writers of I Kings tell us.

He is said to have composed 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs and that he could discourse learnedly about all manner of plants, animals, birds, reptiles and fishes.

SOLOMON THE KING

Under Solomon’s rule, the borders established by his father, David, were secured. They extended to the Euphrates River in the north and to the Arabian Desert in the east and south. Syria, Ammon, Moab and Edom were established as vassal states to Israel. Peace was established with the Philistines, and the Phoenician king, Hiram, became a personal friend of Solomon as he had been a friend of David.

Israel was peaceful, prosperous and proud.

For tax purposes, the country was divided according to the twelve tribes, with each tribe responsible for one twelfth of the country’s budget.

Where David’s foreign policy relied on the strength of his army, Solomon tended to lean more on his ability to develop trade agreements and political alliances with neighboring countries. Since Israel sat astride most of the major trade routes between Turkey, Syria, Persia and Egypt, toll stations were set up to collect tariffs on merchandise passing between countries.

Up to this point, the Israelites had been hill people whose only sea farers were the fishermen who plied the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Taking advantage of his friendship with Hiram, king of the Phoenicians, Solomon was able to send engineers to the capitol port city of Tyre to learn boat building and seafaring. Within a few years, Israel had a navy. And with a navy the copper ore from King Solomon’s mines was now able to be transported for sale all over the Middle East.²

The navy also made it possible to import the precious cedar from Lebanon and it was with that cedar that Solomon built the first temple, a task that took seven years and the labor of 80,000 men all over the country. The building of the palace employed the same men for thirteen more years and, when that was finished, Solomon set about building fortresses and safe houses all over the country, especially along the roads and near the borders.

All of those treaties and agreements with other countries were usually sealed with an appropriate marriage, giving rise to the term “Harem Statecraft.” As an enthusiastic proponent of this foreign policy Solomon’s own harem grew to include some seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. And lest we think that these were merely marriages of political convenience, the writers tell us that “...King Solomon loved many foreign women: the daughter of Pharaoh, and Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women.” (I Kgs. 11:1) Eugene Peterson in his Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, puts it a little more bluntly: “King Solomon was obsessed with women.”

Contemporary scholars tell us that the amounts of food and staples that were collected from each tribe for running the kingly household and recorded in the books of Kings and Chronicles would indicate a household of between five and six thousand people – wives, concubines, children, nannies, teachers, advisors, bodyguards and various members of the household staff.

SHEBA

So, according to the legends and stories, Solomon didn’t just marry these women out of a sense of duty for God and country, he actually fell in love with each and every one of them.

And this is why there is one woman who stands out above all the rest and about whom there are so many legends, stories, fantasies, and myths, for she, too, was royalty. She was ebony skinned and beautiful, smart and sassy, rich, powerful, and full of surprises.

Her story takes up only 13 verses of scripture (I Kings 10: 1-13) but she has captured the imagination of Christians, Jews and Moslems for these three thousand years. She is said to be the founder of a mysterious branch of African Judaism that exists in Ethiopia, to this day. Movies have been made and novels have been written about her and we shall take up her story next week.

Her name has been lost. She is remembered as, simply... The Queen of Sheba

AMEN

² So rich in copper are these mines that they are still being worked, today!