From the Rabbi's Desk
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Insights into the Bible
[12]

King Solomon's Wisdom

I Kings 3:16-28

Background to Our Story

King Solomon

AI Overview

King Solomon (reigned c. 970–931 BCE) was the third king of ancient Israel and is one of the most significant figures in the Hebrew Bible [10, 31]. The son of King David and Bathsheba, he is best known for his legendary wisdom, his immense wealth, and for building the First Temple in Jerusalem [3, 21]. His 40-year reign is often described as Israel's "Golden Age," a period characterized by peace, prosperity, and vast territorial expansion [8, 11, 24].

Background to Our Story

The background of the story (Chapter 3: 1-15) is Solomon's dream, a dream that set the tone of his reign and had implications for the future of the Jewish people.

When Solomon was twelve years old, he had a prophetic dream. In it God asked newly crowned Solomon what blessing he desired for his new position. Solomon requested wisdom so that he could judge his people well. Pleased that Solomon had altruistically asked for wisdom, and not selfishly requested longevity, wealth, or power, God promised him not only unprecedented wisdom, such as had never been before and would never be seen again, but also the wealth and honor for which he had not asked.

Shortly after the dream came proof of its fulfillment in the form of a seemingly insoluble dilemma. Solomon's verdict gained the admiration and respect of the nation and displayed a degree of wisdom that became the hallmark of his reign and an augur of the three inspiring and enlightening books he would contribute to Scripture: Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes.

THE STORY

Chapter 2:15-18

אָז תָּבֹאנָה שְׁתַּיִם נָשִׁים זֹנוֹת אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ וַתַּעֲמֹדְנָה לְפָנָיו׃
וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה הָאַחַת בִּי אֲדֹנִי אֲנִי וְהָאִשָּׁה הַזֹּאת יֹשְׁבֹת בְּבֵית אֶחָד וָאֵלֵד עִמָּהּ בַּבָּיִת׃ וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי
לְלִדְתִּי וַתֵּלֶד גַּם־הָאִשָּׁה הַזֹּאת וַאֲנַחְנוּ יַחְדָּו אֵין־זָר אִתָּנוּ בַּבַּיִת זוּלָתִי שְׁתַּיִם־אֲנַחְנוּ בַּבָּיִת׃ וַיָּמָת בֶּן־הָאִשָּׁה
הַזֹּאת לָיְלָה אֲשֶׁר שָׁכְבָה עָלָיו׃ וַתָּקָם בְּתוֹךְ הַלַּיְלָה וַתִּקַּח אֶת־בְּנִי מֵאֶצְלִי וַאֲמָתְךָ יְשֵׁנָה וַתַּשְׁכִּיבֵהוּ בְּחֵיקָהּ
וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ הַמֵּת הִשְׁכִּיבָה בְחֵיקִי׃ וָאָקָם בַּבֹּקֶר לְהֵינִיק אֶת־בְּנִי וְהִנֵּה־מֵת וָאֶתְבּוֹנֵן אֵלָיו בַּבֹּקֶר וְהִנֵּה לֹא־הָיָה בְנִי
אֲשֶׁר יָלָדְתִּי׃

וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה הָאַחֶרֶת לֹא כִי בְנִי הַחַי וּבִנֵךְ הַמֵּת וְזֹאת אֹמֶרֶת לֹא כִי בִנֵךְ הַמֵּת וּבְנִי הֶחָי וַתְּדַבֵּרְנָה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ׃
וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ זֹאת אֹמֶרֶת זֶה־בְּנִי הַחַי וּבִנֵךְ הַמֵּת וְזֹאת אֹמֶרֶת לֹא כִי בִנֵךְ הַמֵּת וּבְנִי הֶחָי׃ וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ קְחוּ
לִי־חֶרֶב וַיָּבִאוּ הַחֶרֶב לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ׃ וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ גִּזְרוּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד הַחַי לִשְׁנָיִם וּתְנוּ אֶת־הַחֲצִי לְאַחַת וְאֶת־הַחֲצִי
לְאֶחָת׃
וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־בְּנָהּ הַחַי אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי־נִכְמְרוּ רַחֲמֶיהָ עַל־בְּנָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר ׀ בִּי אֲדֹנִי תְּנוּ־לָהּ אֶת־הַיָּלוּד הַחַי
וְהָמֵת אַל־תְּמִיתֻהוּ וְזֹאת אֹמֶרֶת גַּם־לִי גַּם־לָךְ לֹא יִהְיֶה גְּזֹרוּ׃

וַיַּעַן הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר תְּנוּ־לָהּ אֶת־הַיָּלוּד הַחַי וְהָמֵת לֹא תְמִיתֻהוּ הִיא אִמּוֹ׃

וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַמִּשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁר שָׁפַט הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּרְאוּ מִפְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי רָאוּ כִּי־חָכְמַת אֱלֹהִים בְּקִרְבּוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת
מִשְׁפָּט׃

16 Later two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him

17 And one woman said, "O my lord, this woman and I dwell in the same house; and I gave birth while she *was* in the house. **18** Then it happened, the third day after I had given birth, that this woman also gave birth. And we *were* together; no one *was* with us in the house, except the two of us in the house. **19** And this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. **20** So she arose in the middle of the night and took my son from my side, while your maidservant slept, and laid him in her bosom, and laid her dead child in my bosom. **21** And when I rose in the morning to nurse my son, there he was, dead. But when I had examined him in the morning, indeed, he was not my son whom I had borne."

22 Then the other woman said, "No! But the living one *is* my son, and the dead one *is* your son." And the first woman said, "No! But the dead one *is* your son, and the living one *is* my son."

Thus they spoke before the king.

23 And the king said, "The one says, 'This *is* my son, who lives, and your son *is* the dead one'; and the other says, 'No! But your son *is* the dead one, and my son *is* the living one.' " **24** Then the king said, "Bring me a sword." So they brought a sword before the king. **25** And the king said, "Divide the living child in two, and give half to one, and half to the other."

26 Then the woman whose son *was* living spoke to the king, for she yearned with compassion for her son; and she said, "O my lord, give her the living child, and by no means kill him!"

But the other said, "Let him be neither mine nor yours, *but* divide *him.*"

27 So the king answered and said, "Give the first woman the living child, and by no means kill him; she *is* his mother."

28 And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had rendered; and they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God *was* in him to administer justice.

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus ? Why is it relevant for our story to know that the two women were prostitutes?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did the women stand before the King (Solomon)?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why is this a seemingly insoluble dilemma?

? What is the "logic" of the king's decision to cut the child in two?

? What is irrational about the king's decision?

Extra Bonus ? The real mother rushed to tell the king: "O my lord, give her the living child, and by no means kill him!" Why didn't she trust that the king wouldn't do such a terrible thing as cutting the baby in half?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus ? How did King Solomon's mind work in this case? (hint: it is not as simple as you think)

Extra Bonus ? King Solomon's wise plan had a flaw. Something that would have thwarted his plan didn't happen. What was it?

Extra Bonus ? *But the other said, "Let him be neither mine nor yours, but divide him." Why didn't the "pretend" mother take the child as she was offered, and instead insist that the child be divided?*

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Wrapping up!

! Wisdom and Power: Two Different Ways to Solve Problems.

! Knowledge of Human Nature: The Greatest Knowledge of All.

Appendix 1

Ooka of Edo, by Renee Brachfeld and Mark Novak

Appendix 2

Settled Into a Higher Purpose

By Marty Kaarre

*And the king said, "Get me a sword . . . and cut the living child in two. Give half to each one of them." (*1 Kings 3:24-25)

Two mothers bring their case before King Solomon. One woman claims her child was stolen in the night – that the other woman's son died, so she stole hers. The other woman says it's a lie. Both women claim to be the mother of the child, and now Solomon must decide who the true mother really is.

Have you ever wished you had greater wisdom? I'm not talking about the ability to dominate at Trivial Pursuit™. Wisdom is not about knowledge, but the ability to see. It's not about the quantity of our intelligence but the quality of our decisions.

We left King Solomon a moment ago with a dilemma: two women claiming to be the mother of a child. To which woman should he award the child?

While we give Solomon a moment to think, let's grow in wisdom by playing a game. If you can solve Solomon's dilemma in one hour, I'll give you five bucks. If you can figure out how Solomon can know the real mother within ten minutes, I'll give you all of my daughter's pets. And, if you solve this case within one minute, I'll stage a coup d'etat and install you as the dictator of a Third World country. (If, however, you've already been taught this story in Sunday school, you're disqualified from the competition, and, if you wish to become a despot, I must leave you to your own devices.)

Since I'm dangling some pretty handsome rewards in front of you, you might as well set your watch and start thinking before you read further. Just remember: your reward is based on how quickly you solve the riddle.

Researchers from MIT, the University of Chicago, and Carnegie Mellon did a study in which they gave rewards for the speed with which participants could perform various tasks. If the tasks involved simple mechanical skill, rewards increased the speed with which the tasks were completed. But – and here is the surprise – when the task

involved creative thinking, the higher the reward offered, the longer it took the participants to find the correct solution.

Wisdom is like that: you can't increase it by trying harder. It doesn't come through the desire for reward. Wisdom thrives when we're relaxed and settled into a higher purpose than personal benefit – like when we're living for the glory of God.

Solomon, as you may know, solved his dilemma by requesting a sword and offering to slice the child in two – giving half to each woman. The woman who protested and pleaded that the child be given to the other claimant was deemed the true mother.

If you figured out the solution to Solomon's problem, I hope you won my daughter's pets. Inciting an insurrection in a Third World country is dicey . . . and offering to do so wasn't very wise of me.

Appendix 3

The Story in Paintings: The judgement of Solomon

The Eclectic Light Company

Many of the stories shown in paintings are complex if not rambling, and choosing the best scene is often tricky. The Old Testament story of the Judgement of Solomon is different: although it involves subtleties of human character and (in modern terms) Game Theory, there is only one moment which merits depiction, which is a coincidence of action, climax, and a form of peripeteia. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, this story was a very popular motif for paintings until about 1700 and has seldom appeared since.

The story

This is drawn from the Old Testament, the First book of Kings, chapter 3.

King Solomon was known for his wisdom and sense of justice. Like many kings, he sat in judgement over disputes, assuming the role of the ultimate court of appeal. One day, two young women (often interpreted as being prostitutes) who lived in the same house came to him seeking his judgement. Both had recently given birth to sons, but one of the sons had died, leaving the mothers in dispute over the surviving infant.

Mother A claimed that mother B had accidentally smothered B's own baby when she was asleep, so had taken A's baby instead. B claimed that no such thing had happened, but that A's baby had died, and the surviving baby was her own. So both mothers claimed the one living child as their own.

After some thought, Solomon called for a sword, and declared that the only fair solution was to cut the live child in two, so that each mother could receive half of him. The true mother then implored Solomon to give the whole baby to the other mother if that would spare his life, but the liar called on Solomon to go ahead and divide the infant as he had proposed. From this Solomon deduced the identity of the true mother, and entrusted her with the infant's care.

The obvious moment to show in a painting is the threat to cut the live child in two. The preceding history can then be portrayed by showing both women and their infants, one alive and about to be cut in two, the other still dead. The resolution can be shown by the true

mother's reaction to try to spare the baby's life, contrasting with the false mother's obvious acceptance.

I consider the pictorial solutions according to the compositional arrangement: the scene viewed facing Solomon's throne, from the side with the throne at one side of the painting, and diagonally.

Head on, throne in the center

Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (Raphael) (1483–1520), The Judgment of Solomon (1518-19), fresco, Loggia di Raffaello, Apostolic Palace, Vatican City. Wikimedia Commons.

Raphael's fresco of 1518-19 avoids excessive symmetry by putting the courtier who is about to cut the live infant in two, that baby, and the true mother on the left, the dead baby in the middle in front of Solomon, and the false mother and a group of other courtiers at the right. The three key faces (Solomon, the two mothers) are shown in profile, which limits our ability to read their expressions. He has chosen the peak moment of climax, the sword held aloft and the real mother intervening to save her baby.

Workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), The Judgment of Solomon (c 1537), oil on poplar wood, 206.5 × 142 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. Wikimedia Commons.

Only slightly later, in about 1537, the workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder produced a very different version on a panel. Much of the painting is taken up by the members and trappings of Solomon's court, and the King himself is distant, appearing quite disengaged. This puts the mothers, their babies, and the sword-bearing courtier in the foreground, but there their roles are unclear. The moment is slightly earlier – before the sword is raised ready to strike – and this means that the true mother has not raised her protest.

Antoon Claeissens (c 1536–1613), The Judgement of Solomon (1605-13), oil on panel, 100 x 128 cm, Private collection. Wikimedia Commons.

Antoon Claeissens panel of 1605-13 is clearer, but still not as brilliant as Raphael's. The live baby is now held by a soldier, as another brandishes his sword in readiness. The true mother is presumably on the right, kneeling and imploring Solomon that the baby's life is spared. But the timing is still a little premature, the reaction of the other mother ambivalent, and the true climax has been missed. He has the same problems as Raphael with showing emotion in the mothers' faces in profile, too.

Valentin de Boulogne (1591–1632), The Judgment of Solomon (c 1625), oil on canvas, 176 x 210 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Wikimedia Commons.

Valentin de Boulogne's painting of about 1625 is closer and more intimate, shutting extraneous objects out in the dark, including the all-important sword. Here the sword has yet to be raised; although he suggests that the mother on the left is trying to prevent the baby from being cut

in two, she is facing away, and both her facial expression and body language are harder to read as a result. The mother on the right clutches her chest and looks in earnest too, confounding the story.

Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), The Judgment of Solomon (1649), oil on canvas, 101 x 150 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Wikimedia Commons.

Nicolas Poussin's famous painting of 1649 uses similar composition to Raphael's, the mothers and their actions preventing it from becoming too symmetrical. Although timed slightly before the sword is raised, he depicts the body language extremely clearly. Solomon's hands indicate his role as the arbiter, in showing a fair balance between the two sides.

The true mother, on the left, holds her left hand up to tell the soldier to stop following the King's instructions and spare the infant. Her right hand is extended towards the false mother, indicating that she has asked for the baby to go to her rather than die. The false mother points accusingly at the child, her expression full of hatred. Hands are also raised in the group at the right, perhaps indicating their reactions to Solomon's judgement.

William Blake (1757–1827), The Judgment of Solomon (c 1799-1800), tempera, 26.6 x 38.1 cm, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, England. Courtesy of The William Blake Archive, via Wikimedia Commons.

William Blake's painting from 1799-1800 emphasises its symmetry behind the two mothers, which in turn lays emphasis on the asymmetry of the four actors. The sword is brandished rather than poised to sweep down on the baby, and both mothers are reaching for the infant. This leaves their roles unresolved, but the King's left hand is held out to stay execution, the right pointing to the mother on the left, who is thus presumably the true mother, intervening to save the child.

Side view

Giorgione (1477–1510), Judgment of Solomon (c 1505), oil on panel, 89 x 72 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Wikimedia Commons.

This panel attributed to Giorgione and dated around 1505 mirrors the composition of his *Trial of Moses* (c 1496-9), to which it might have been a pendant. Solomon is shown in advanced age, commanding the courtier who has raised his short sword ready. The two mothers straddle the midline of the panel, their body language not clear enough to indicate which is the true.

José de Ribera (1591–1652), The Judgement of Solomon (1609-10), oil on canvas, 153 × 201 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome. Wikimedia Commons.

José de Ribera's powerful painting of 1609-10 is far more eloquent of emotion. The courtier still has his sword in its scabbard, though, and the imminent threat to the baby he holds in his left hand is concealed as a result. The true mother stands right up against Solomon, almost but not quite touching him, her left hand reaching out to stop the sword from being drawn, the right poised over Solomon's right hand, which is directing the courtier.

The false mother kneels, less engaged, but looking up at Solomon with a degree of scorn. A few men at the right are debating the wisdom of Solomon's judgement already, and there are two mysterious faces behind Solomon's head.

Didier Barra (1590–1644), The Judgment of Solomon (c 1630), oil on canvas, 38 x 49 cm, Private collection. Wikimedia Commons.

In about 1630, Didier Barra lost the story in his exuberant and elaborate depiction of the setting. Although the actors are each apparently playing their roles well – the soldier preparing to cut the baby in two, the mothers reacting, and Solomon directing – they seem a side-show to his architectural study.

Francisco Gutiérrez Cabello (1616-1670), The Judgment of Solomon (1650), oil on canvas, 108 x 166 cm, Fundación Banco Santander, Madrid, Spain. Wikimedia Commons.

Francisco Gutiérrez Cabello's slightly later painting of 1650 almost falls into the same trap. Squeezed into the lower left sixth of its surface, it still manages to show the action, but

working out which is the true mother is difficult. Putting both mothers and the living baby so close together makes it much harder to use body language to tell the story too.

William Dyce (1806–1864), The Judgement of Solomon (1836), tempera on canvas, 151.2 x 245 cm, Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland. The Athenaeum.

William Dyce uses the linear arrangement much more effectively. The two mothers intervene between Solomon, high on his throne at the left directing the courtier at the right, who brandishes his sword ready to take the baby and hack it in two. Despite the awkward angle, he gives us sufficient view of the mothers' faces to make it clear which is which, and the true mother's protective hold of the child confirms that.

Diagonal

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), The Judgement of Solomon (c 1617), oil on canvas, 234 × 303 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark. Wikimedia Commons.

Peter Paul Rubens' version of about 1617 has a more complex and sophisticated composition, the two mothers appearing on either side of the courtier rather than the King. By putting the true mother's back to the viewer, so that we cannot see her face, we have to place complete reliance on our reading of her body language. We get a much better view of the false mother's face, which is left surprisingly neutral in expression, and her body language is also not

particularly helpful. In the end sufficient clues are given to enable reading of the painting, but its story could have been rather more plain.

Antonio Molinari and workshop (1655–1704), The Judgement of Solomon (c 1690), oil on canvas, 112.6 × 133 cm, location not known. Wikimedia Commons.

Antonio Molinari and his workshop in around 1690 preferred an even closer and tighter view of just the principal actors. For once the King seems detached and not in control, which significantly weakens the story. Both mothers are together at the right, one bent forward apparently pleading for the baby's life, the other seemingly disinterested in events. The courtier armed with his sword takes the left, where he is put in the spotlight, ready to cut the infant in two. I think this works rather well in the end.

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770), The Judgment of Solomon (1726-9), ?fresco, dimensions not known, Palazzo Arcivescovile, Udine, Italy. Wikimedia Commons.

Tiepolo faced a tougher task when he painted this story on a ceiling in 1726-9. The consequent limitations to reading facial expressions force him to make body language even clearer, and bear the weight of telling the story. The true mother reaches up to prevent the courtier from cutting the child in two, while the false mother sits passively watching behind the baby. That cluster of figures – both mothers, the courtier, and the bay – turns out to be both powerful and effective, although it may perhaps have been even more effective if he had come in closer to crop out other irrelevant detail, and heighten the viewer's engagement.

Conclusions

Despite the limited choices in timing and content needed to tell this story, its composition has proved an interesting challenge. As in many confrontational situations, putting the main actors in positions where their faces and body language can be read is often difficult. A head on view gives an excellent opportunity to show King Solomon, but readily obscures the faces of the mothers. A side view may simplify the actors into a more linear arrangement, but also makes it hard to follow Alberti's rules.

Key to telling this story clearly is making obvious contrast between the two mothers, to establish which is the true, and which the false. I think that Raphael, Poussin, de Ribera, and Tiepolo achieved that very well by placement and body language, as you might expect from those Masters.