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## Stories with a Twist

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### And ultimately he Ruled Over Only His Staff Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 20b



#### Background to Our Story

##### King Solomon



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon>

Solomon (Hebrew: שְׁלֹמֹה, *Shlomoh*) was, according to the Hebrew Bible, Quran, and Hadiths, a fabulously wealthy and wise king of Israel who succeeded his father, King David. The conventional dates of Solomon's reign are circa 970 to 931 BCE, normally given in alignment with the dates of David's reign. He is described as the third king of the United Monarchy, which would break apart into the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah shortly after his death. Following the split, his patrilineal descendants ruled over Judah alone.

The Hebrew Bible credits him as the builder of the First Temple in Jerusalem, beginning in the fourth year of his reign, using the vast wealth he and his father had accumulated. He dedicated the temple to the God of Israel. He is portrayed as great in wisdom, wealth and power beyond either of the previous kings of the country, but also as a king who sinned. His sins included idolatry, marrying foreign women and, ultimately, turning away from Yahweh, and they led to the kingdom's being torn in two during the reign of his son Rehoboam.

Solomon was the biblical king most famous for his [wisdom](#). In 1 Kings he sacrificed to God, and God later appeared to him in a dream asking what Solomon wanted from God. Solomon asked for wisdom. Pleased, God personally answered Solomon's prayer, promising him great wisdom because he did not ask for self-serving rewards like long life or the death of his enemies.

Perhaps the best known story of his wisdom is the [Judgment of Solomon](#); two women each lay claim to being the mother of the same child. Solomon easily resolved the

dispute by commanding the child to be cut in half and shared between the two. One woman promptly renounced her claim, proving that she would rather give the child up than see it killed. Solomon declared the woman who showed [compassion](#) to be the true mother, entitled to the whole child.

Solomon was traditionally considered the author of several biblical books, "including not only the collections of [Proverbs](#), but also of [Ecclesiastes](#) and the [Song of Solomon](#) and the later apocryphal book the [Wisdom of Solomon](#)."

According to the Hebrew Bible, the Israelite monarchy gained its highest splendor and wealth during Solomon's reign of 40 years. In a single year, according to 1 Kings 10:14, Solomon collected tribute amounting to 666 talents (18,125 kilograms) of gold. Solomon is described as surrounding himself with all the luxuries and the grandeur of an Eastern monarch, and his government prospered. He entered into an alliance with Hiram I, king of Tyre, who in many ways greatly assisted him in his numerous undertakings.

According to the biblical account, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. The wives were described as foreign princesses, including Pharaoh's daughter and women of Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon and of the Hittites. His marriage to Pharaoh's daughter appears to have cemented a political alliance with Egypt whereas he clung to his other wives and concubines "in love".

The only wife mentioned by name is Naamah the Ammonite, mother of Solomon's successor, Rehoboam. The biblical narrative notes with disapproval that Solomon permitted his foreign wives to import their national deities, building temples to Ashtoreth and Milcom.

## The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 20b

אמר ריש לקיש: בתחילה מלך שלמה על העליונים, שנאמר: "וישב שלמה על כסא ה'".

ולבסוף מלך על התחתונים, שנאמר: "כי הוא רדה בכל עבר הנהר מתפסח ועד עזה". רב ושמואל. חד אמר: תפסח בסוף העולם, ועזה בסוף העולם. וחד אמר: תפסח ועזה בהדי הדדי הוו יתבו, וכשם שמלך על תפסח ועל עזה, כך מלך על כל העולם כולו.

ולבסוף לא מלך אלא על ישראל, שנאמר: "אני, קהלת, הייתי מלך על ישראל" וגו'.

ולבסוף לא מלך אלא על ירושלים, שנאמר "דברי קהלת, בן דוד מלך בירושלים".

ולבסוף לא מלך אלא על מטתו, שנאמר: "הנה מטתו של שלמה" וגו'.

ולבסוף לא מלך אלא על מקלו, שנאמר: "זה היה חלקי מכל עמלי".

Reish Lakish says: Initially, Solomon ruled even over the heavenly worlds, as it is stated: "Then Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord" (I Chronicles 29:23).

But ultimately, he ruled over only the lower worlds, as it is stated: *"For he had dominion over all the region on this side of the river, from Tiphseh even to Gaza" (I Kings 5:4).*

(Rav and Shmuel disagreed with regard to the meaning of this verse: One says that Tiphseh is a name of a place at the end of the world, at one end of Solomon's kingdom, and Gaza is at the other end of the world. And one says that Tiphseh and Gaza sat next to each other, and the verse serves to teach that just as he ruled over Tiphseh and over Gaza, so he ruled over the whole world.)

And ultimately, he ruled only over Israel, as it is stated: *"I Koheleth, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem" (Ecclesiastes 1:12).*

And ultimately, he ruled over only Jerusalem, as it is stated: *"The words of Koheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Ecclesiastes 1:1).*

And ultimately, he ruled over only his bed, as it is stated: *"Behold, it is the bed of Solomon; threescore mighty men are about it, of the mighty men of Israel" (Song of Songs 3:7).*

And ultimately, he declined so much that he ruled over only his staff, as it is stated: *"And this was my portion from all of my labor" (Ecclesiastes 2:10).*



**Explaining the Story (What is the sequence of events that take place in the story?)**

### **Comprehension and Analysis Questions**

**?** Why was King Solomon able to rule –so to speak– even over the heavenly worlds?

**?** Why do you think King Solomon lost his ability to rule over the heavenly worlds?

**?** As the years passed by, why do you think it was easier for King Solomon to rule over Israel than to rule over his entire kingdom?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** As the years passed by, why do you think King Solomon lost his ability to rule over Israel while retaining his ability to rule over Jerusalem?

**Bonus ?** How do you interpret "...and ultimately, he ruled over only his bed"?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** How do you interpret "...and ultimately, he ruled over only his staff"?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why do you think the Sages weaved this short story about King Solomon?

### **"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text**

**!** Downsizing in strength, power, and space. The inevitable fate of all human beings (including kings) as we age.

## EPILOGUE