

SOLOMON: THE TOO WISE KING

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When Solomon became king at the age of twelve, it was his mother's influence with King David, and not Solomon's personal abilities or virtues that made Solomon the new ruler (I Kg. 1:11-35). At the beginning of his reign we find that *Solomon loved the Lord, acting in accordance with the decrees of his father David* (I Kg. 3:3). His famous wisdom only appears later.

Solomon had a dream in which God asked him what he wanted. Solomon answered with humility that he was only *a young lad; I do not know how to go out and come in* (I Kg. 3:7), one who now had the great responsibility of leading the nation of Israel. Solomon asked God for wisdom to make the right decisions and to always know right from wrong. God was pleased with this answer. God told Solomon that because he had not asked for long life, or great wealth, or victories over his enemies, he would be given all those things, as well as great wisdom (I Kg. 3:5-14). Some time after this dream, the famous judgment of the two women and the baby took place (I Kg. 3:16-27). As a result of Solomon's ruling, all of Israel *saw that the wisdom of God was within him* (I Kg. 3:28).

While this seems well and good, the Talmud (T.B. *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 21b) presents a subtle criticism of Solomon. We find there that upon receiving the gift of wisdom and after ruling on the case of the baby, Solomon felt he could judge cases just by his own intuition, without testimony from witnesses. Thereupon, a heavenly voice called out to remind him of Deuteronomy 17:6, that two witnesses are needed to make a proper ruling. We have here a caution that at least some of our sages thought Solomon may have become a little too taken with his own wisdom and too clever for his own good.

Solomon was not only reputed to be wise in judgment. His wisdom is described at length in I Kings 5:9-14, where specific mention is made of the many poems and proverbs that he authored. According to rabbinic tradition, Solomon wrote some or much of the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:11). However, as we shall soon see, he often did

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not follow his own proverbial wisdom. He was a wise king in terms of improving the economy for his country. During the years that Solomon ruled, the people of Israel enjoyed great prosperity because Solomon invested in and encouraged international trade. The people of Israel also lived in peace with their neighbors because Solomon made many alliances with rulers of the countries around Israel, sealing each one with a royal marriage. However, the first marriage alliance made by Solomon with a foreign power, Egypt, took place before he was granted great wisdom (I Kg. 3:1). This way of ensuring peace was not a wise plan. It foreshadowed the troubles that Solomon would be led into because of his foreign wives.

Solomon took advantage of the peace and prosperity to build a beautiful Temple for the Lord in the city of Jerusalem. While this was a very important and holy undertaking, there is a subtle indication that Solomon may have been somewhat self-centered. Note that Solomon spent seven years building the Temple of the Lord, but it took him almost twice as long, 13 years, to build a palace for himself (I Kg. 6:38-7:1).¹ Of course, one reason it took so long is because Solomon actually built two palaces for himself, as well as stables to house horses for his chariots (I Kg. 5:6). One of the palaces was built with thousands of cedar trees that were imported from Lebanon and was called the Forest of Lebanon Palace. The other, the much bigger and expensive one, was built of stone covered with gold leaf. In a further extravagance, all of Solomon's dishes for eating, and cups for drinking, were made of solid gold. Additionally, Solomon's throne was made of solid ivory overlaid with pure gold (I Kg. 10:18-21). Everything that Solomon built was intended to be very impressive. Thus Solomon ignored his wise advice, *A good name is more desirable than great riches and a good reputation is better than silver and gold* (Prov. 22:1).

One may wonder why Solomon needed two palaces, while God needed only one. Also, the Temple of the Lord was open to everyone, day by day, and everyone was encouraged to bring offerings and pray there. Solomon's palace was certainly not as open to the public. In all probability, only the rich and the powerful were invited into Solomon's palace. The Torah teaches that a king must not multiply horses for himself; must not multiply wives for himself; and must not multiply gold and silver for himself (Deut. 17:16-17). Solomon did not follow any of these wise rules. The Talmud (T.B. *Sanhedrin*

21b) states that Solomon understood the reasons for these rules but felt that he was wise enough to avoid any negative consequences. Once again we see that Solomon was too clever for his own good.

Profits from international trade defrayed part of the cost of Solomon's impressive buildings, but almost all of the cost of labor weighed on the shoulders of working people. To cut the cedar trees in Lebanon, 30,000 men had to work four months a year. Beyond this, *Solomon had seventy thousand who carried burdens and eighty thousand who hewed in the mountain* (I Kg. 5:29). As the years went by, the workers became less and less attracted to Solomon's impressive buildings. They complained of the heavy yoke Solomon forced on them. But Solomon was too wise to pay attention to their burdensome plight (I Kg. 12:4). He must have forgotten his own wise saying: *Be careful to know your own sheep, and take good care of your flocks, for possessions do not last forever, nor will a crown endure for endless generations* (Prov. 27:23-24).

In Proverbs we find a description of a good wife, *A valiant wife is the crown of her husband* (Prov. 12:4), and the lament: *Who can find a valiant wife? Her value is far beyond jewels* (Prov. 31:10). Solomon also declares that *He who finds a wife finds goodness* (Prov. 18:22), yet finding this wife is no easy task: *One after another I numbered and I did not find what my soul sought. One man among a thousand I found, but I did not find one woman among them* (Eccl. 7:27-28). Perhaps these statements are to be understood as Solomon's admission that his policy of marrying hundreds of women was a grave error. The foreign wives, although expedient in terms of foreign relations, were inappropriate partners. *Charm is deceptive and beauty is illusory but a religious woman should be praised* (Prov. 31:30). Although Solomon cautions his listeners: *Enjoy happiness with a wife you love for all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you* (Eccl. 9:9), he does not seem to have followed his own proclaimed wisdom.

After Solomon died, the people of Israel complained to his son about the late ruler's hard yoke. They wanted the new king to make their burdens lighter. He did not listen to the wisdom of his older advisors and refused to reduce the workers' forced labor (I Kg. 12:1-20). Ten of the 12 tribes of Israel then chose another king instead of him. Apparently, Solomon never taught this son the wise proverb, *Whoever relies on his wealth is riding for a fall*

(Prov. 11:28), or else Solomon taught his son, "Don't do what I say, do what I do."

NOTE

1. Rashi, however, explains that it took less time to build the Temple because Solomon was filled with zeal to perform this holy task.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR
 DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ
 2011

April	I Chronicles	12 – 29
	II Chronicles	1 – 15
May	II Chronicles	16 – 36
	Genesis	1 – 8
June	Genesis	9 – 36
July	Genesis	37 – 50
	Exodus	1 – 14
August	Exodus	15 – 40
	Leviticus	1 – 3

