

CUT THE BABY IN HALF: UNDERSTANDING SOLOMON'S DIVINELY-INSPIRED WISDOM

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King Solomon, the wisest of all men, received the divine gift of wisdom by making the right wish:

And God said to him, "Because you asked for this – you did not ask for long life, you did not ask for riches, you did not ask for the life of your enemies, but you asked for discernment in dispensing justice – I now do as you have spoken. I grant you a wise and discerning mind; there has never been anyone like you before, nor will anyone like you arise again" (I Kg. 3:11-12).

Most commentators accept the literal reading of the text that Solomon was the wisest person ever. However, Ralbag suggests that Solomon was the wisest only during the period spanning the generation before and after him. In part, Ralbag is speaking as a medieval Jewish philosopher. Ralbag maintains that the wiser the person, the higher level of prophecy he should receive. Since Moses was the greatest prophet, he also must have been the wisest person. He also finds it implausible that there never again would be someone wiser than Solomon. Abarbanel sharply disagrees with Ralbag, since Solomon's wisdom was miraculous. Perhaps God-given wisdom does not follow the conventional rules that may otherwise connect wisdom and prophecy.¹

While the foregoing debate is more related to medieval Jewish philosophy than it is to ascertaining the plain meaning of the biblical narrative, it calls attention to a textual question that has bedeviled commentators for centuries. Immediately following God's grant of unparalleled wisdom, the Book of Kings relates the famed story of Solomon's awarding a baby to the right woman (3:16-28).

Solomon's brilliant and shocking resolution gained him instant national fame and royal authority: *When all Israel heard the decision that the king*

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had rendered, they stood in awe of the king; for they saw that he possessed divine wisdom to execute justice. King Solomon was now king over all Israel (3:28-4:1).

However, many commentators are perturbed. Solomon's suddenly producing a sword and threatening to cut the baby in half is clever and he rendered justice in a difficult trial without any witnesses. But does this solution really demonstrate that he was the wisest person of all time? Ralbag's claim that Solomon's wisdom was the greatest only for those generations would obviate this difficulty.

Of course, the plain sense of the text does indicate that Solomon was the wisest man of all time. Confronting this question, several medieval halakhists proposed extra-textual possibilities, including sophisticated legal discussions pertaining to levirate marriage. However, such halakhic answers are far removed from the text, and serve only to highlight the difficulty of the narrative question.

Several commentators seek ways of demonstrating that Solomon knew the true mother before the sword was brought out. He produced the sword only to prove to everyone else what he already had ascertained with his special wisdom. R. Joseph Kara (on 3:18) observes that the first woman said that three days separated the boys' births. Perhaps Solomon noticed that the older baby looked more physically developed and Solomon was able to determine the truth teller based on this observation. Alternatively, Abarbanel suggests that Solomon perceptively studied the facial expressions, manner of speaking, and body language of the women and deduced the answer. He then explained to his audience who the true mother was, and brought out the sword to demonstrate what he already knew. However, nothing in the narrative suggests these interpretations.

Some commentators note that the narrative may not contain an exact transcript of the court dialogue. Rather, its literary presentation may be exploited for interpretive clues. In this vein, R. Joseph Ibn Caspi and Yehudah Kiel² suggest that the order of presentation is critical. The first woman presents the facts in a clear and reasoned manner, whereas the second reacts with an emotional outburst:

Later two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. The first woman said, "Please, my lord! This woman and I live in the

same house; and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house. On the third day after I was delivered, this woman also gave birth to a child. We were alone; there was no one else with us in the house, just the two of us in the house. During the night this woman's child died, because she lay on it. She arose in the night and took my son from my side while your maidservant was asleep, and laid him in her bosom; and she laid her dead son in my bosom. When I arose in the morning to nurse my son, there he was, dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, it was not the son I had borne." The other woman spoke up, "No, the live one is my son, and the dead one is yours!" But the first insisted, "No, the dead boy is yours; mine is the live one!" And they went on arguing before the king (3:16-22).

From this literary presentation, these commentators conclude that the first woman is telling the truth.

Unlike the previous answers we have considered, this is an argument from the narrative. However, this interpretation does not account for how Solomon determined the truth teller; the text only indicates to later readers which woman was telling the truth. Additionally, Abarbanel notes that all the second woman could say was that the first woman was lying. Therefore, this reading is not compelling.

Malbim proposes an alternative reading, based on the ordering of the women's statements:

The other woman spoke up, "No, the live one is my son, and the dead one is yours!" But the first insisted, "No, the dead boy is yours; mine is the live one!" And they went on arguing before the king. The king said, "One says, 'This is my son, the live one, and the dead one is yours'; and the other says, 'No, the dead boy is yours, mine is the live one'" (3:22-23).

The "other woman" (who speaks first in the above excerpt) mentions the living child before the dead one – what a normal mother would do. The first woman, however, mentions the dead child first. A mother attempting to demonstrate that her child was alive would mention him first since that is foremost on her mind. When recapping the dialogue in v. 23, Solomon repeats their ordering, and also ignores the longer initial speech of the first woman.

Malbim suggests that had the first woman responded with "*the dead boy is yours; mine is the live one*" only once, Solomon would not have solved this case, since she could have been responding in that order to rebut the claims of the second woman. However, when she repeated this same formulation (*and they went on arguing before the king*), Solomon concluded that foremost on the first woman's mind was to have the living child dead as well.

Malbim's reading also accounts for Solomon's knowing the truth teller before calling for the sword. Additionally, Solomon could be confident that the first woman was not only lying but that if caught off guard she would be willing to have the living baby cut in half.

Literarily, Malbim's textual observation could be explained as a chiasm to demonstrate the unsolvable circularity of the women's arguments. From this point of view, perhaps the reader never learns which woman is the true mother, and can appreciate Solomon's genius all the more.³ If the narrator is trying to hint at Solomon's perception, however, then Malbim's reading becomes more compelling. Whereas most observers and readers hear both women essentially saying "it's mine!" (as did nearly all commentators pre-Malbim), Solomon perceived the subtle detail that mattered.⁴

To summarize: there are interpreters who maintain that the first woman is the truth teller; others who maintain that the second woman is; and others who insist that the reader never learns which of the two wins the case. Many assume that Solomon's wisdom lay in producing the sword, while others attempt to ascertain additional wisdom in Solomon's knowing before he produced the sword.

But another element in the narrative has not yet been addressed. The aforementioned interpreters all focus on a conflict between two women. None considers significant the fact that the litigants are *prostitutes*. It is likely that their being⁵ prostitutes is relevant with regard to there having been no other witnesses. However, it appears that this detail carries greater significance as well. By considering this element in the broader context of chapter 3, a different dimension of Solomon's divine wisdom emerges.

There is a clear link between the two halves of the chapter. When Solomon awakens from his dream, the passage concludes that he *went (va-yavo) to Jerusalem, stood before (va-ya'amod lifnei) the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord . . .* (3:15). In the opening verse of the ensuing narrative, the two prosti-

tutes *came (va-tavona) to the king and stood before him (va-ta'amodna lefanav)* (3:16). The parallel wordings bind the two stories together as dream→fulfillment.

During his prophetic encounter with God (3:5-15), Solomon is always referred to by his name (four times) and never as "king". When rendering judgment to the prostitutes (3:16-28), he always is referred to as "the king" (ten times) and never as "Solomon". Part of the reason behind this appellation shift is to show that before God, all people are equal and nobody else may be called "king". In the episode with the prostitutes, it is specifically Solomon fulfilling an important role of kingship – rendering justice in a difficult case.

Prostitution is a lowly occupation in any society, but especially in a monotheistic theocracy where God's Temple is about to be built. The tenfold repetition of the term "the king" in contrast to these prostitutes, then, is striking. It appears that a primary message of this narrative is that *anyone* could gain an audience with Solomon and receive a fair hearing.⁶

Biblical "wisdom" does not refer only to having a high IQ or superior problem-solving abilities. It includes the ability to judge with fairness and to live righteously in accordance with the principles of wisdom. Just as all people – even kings – stand as equals before God, the true King; so too a king's having divine wisdom means that all people can gain a fair hearing before him in justice.⁷ That prostitutes could gain an audience with Solomon and that he would listen so attentively to their arguments that he could solve their case with no witnesses demonstrate Solomon's true wisdom. If, as many commentators maintain, the Hebrew term *elohim* can be used in reference to human courts (e.g., Exod. 21:6; 22:7-8), perhaps this adds another dimension of meaning here – Solomon is using his wisdom in his capacity as a judge – *elohim*.⁸

No matter which of the foregoing readings is most textually compelling, Solomon used divine wisdom: great intelligence and perception to solve a difficult case; he rendered justice; and he enabled all citizens equally to have a fair trial. Yehudah Kiel⁹ observes that one of Isaiah's celebrated visions of redemption appears to model the ideal king after Solomon in this narrative. He will render justice without witnesses and will judge the poor with equity: *But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse . . . He shall sense the truth by his reverence for the LORD: he shall not judge by what his eyes behold,*

nor decide by what his ears perceive. Thus he shall judge the poor with equity and decide with justice for the lowly of the land . . . (Isa. 11:1-4).¹⁰

Solomon ingeniously solved a difficult case between two prostitutes, giving them as serious a hearing as he would to anyone else in the kingdom. All stood to be heard fairly by the king who judged with divine wisdom.

NOTES

1. Radak specifically maintains that regarding natural wisdom (*hokhmat ha-teva*), Solomon exceeded even Moses. For further discussion of medieval conceptions of "wisdom", see D. Berger, "The Wisest of All Men': Solomon's Wisdom in Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Book of Kings," in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, Y. Elman & J. S. Gurock eds. (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997), pp. 93-114.
2. Y. Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: I Kings* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), pp. 58, 60; cf. M. Garsiel, "Revealing and Concealing as a Narrative Strategy in Solomon's Judgment (1 Kings 3:16-28)," *CBQ* 64 (2002), pp. 229-247.
3. See E. Hadad, "Solomon's Judgment" (Hebrew), *Megadim* 27 (1997), pp. 101-111; M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 166-169, who agree that the reader never learns which of the two women is the true mother.
4. Cf. G. A. Rendsburg, "The Guilty Party in 1 Kings III 16-28," *VT* 48 (1998), pp. 534-541, who similarly concludes that the second woman is the true mother based on different literary considerations from those of Malbim.
5. P. A. Bird ("The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," *Semeia* 46 [1989], pp. 132-133) adds that prostitutes were reputed as smooth-talking self-serving liars, and therefore interrogation would be useless. Solomon's wisdom lay in his appeal to a different stereotype of a woman – her deep emotional bond to her child.
6. H. Rand ("Justice in Solomon's Court: Anonymous vs. Anonymous," *Dor le-Dor* 10 [1982], p. 171) observes that "Solomon's Hall of Justice was open to all litigants – even if the disputants were prostitutes", but then moves on in his analysis of the passage without any further comment to the significance of this detail.
7. For surveys of the range of meanings for "wisdom" (*hokhmah*), see e.g., M. V. Fox, *Anchor Bible: Proverbs 1-9* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 32-34; Y. Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Proverbs* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983), introduction, pp. 20-22.
8. See e.g., Ibn Ezra (short commentary) and Ramban on Exodus 21:6.
9. Y. Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: I Kings*, p. 62.
10. Cf. *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:10 (Soncino translation): "Then Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king (I Chron. 29:23). Said R. Isaac: Is it possible for a man to sit on the throne of the Lord?...What it means, however, is that just...as the Lord on His throne judges without witnesses and without warning, so Solomon on his throne judged without witnesses and without warning. What is the example? The case of the harlots."