

1 Kings 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Kings chapter 3 Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt. He took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David until he had finished building his own house, and the house of the Lord, and the wall around Jerusalem.

The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord. Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father. Only he sacrificed and made offerings at the high places. And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place. Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, Ask what I shall give you. And Solomon said, You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you.

And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child.

[1 : 09] I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life, or riches, or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, Behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you, and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour, so that no other king shall compare with you all your days.

And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days. And Solomon awoke, and behold, it was a dream, Then he came to Jerusalem, and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings, and made a feast for all his servants.

Then two prostitutes came to the king, and stood before him. The one woman said, O my lord, this woman and I live in the same house, and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house.

[2 : 33] Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth, and we were alone. There was no one else with us in the house, only we two were in the house. And this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him.

And she arose at midnight, and took my son from beside me, while your servant slept, and laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. When I rose in the morning to nurse my child, behold, he was dead.

But when I looked at him closely in the morning, behold, he was not the child that I had born. But the other woman said, No, the living child is mine, and the dead child is yours.

The first said, No, the dead child is yours, and the living child is mine. Thus they spoke before the king. Then the king said, The one says, This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead.

And the other says, No, but your son is dead, and my son is the living one. And the king said, Bring me a sword. So a sword was brought before the king. And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other.

[3 : 39] Then the woman whose son was alive said to the king, because her heart yearned for her son, O my lord, give her the living child, and by no means put him to death. But the other said, He shall be neither mine nor yours.

Divide him. Then the king answered and said, Give the living child to the first woman, and by no means put him to death. She is his mother. And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered.

And they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice. The kingdom of Solomon is being established. Rebellious elements have been pacified, and Solomon's power is now unrivalled.

Now we are seeing its rise to its full glory. The chapter begins with a marriage alliance with Egypt. Relations with Egypt had long been an important concern of geopolitics in the land of Canaan. We must consider the strategic situation of the land between Egypt and Mesopotamia and their great powers. The region within which Israel was situated was often a realm where the leading kingdoms were like pawns of the back rank powers that lay behind them.

[4 : 44] The various Egyptian dynasties, Assyria, Babylonia, the Medes, the Persians, the Greeks and others, were the large empires, and the state of affairs in Israel often depended upon relations with them.

The Philistines, for instance, formerly acted as vassals of Egypt in the region, maintaining the influence of Egypt over the area. Now Israel, as a recent rising power in the region, can play that role, and also enjoy Egypt's protection.

Reading the story of Israel, we can often be unmindful of the great geopolitical concerns that lie behind its story. Israel is a small fish in a larger pond, surrounded by many greater powers.

This will become much more prominent of an issue later in Israel and Judah's history, when certain of the large powers would overwhelm the land entirely. Much as Israel's temptation within the land would have been treaties and intermarriage with the Canaanites earlier on, given the fragility of their rootedness in it, the temptation of the king would have been marriage treaties with the surrounding nations.

An Egyptian queen would have been a particularly great international relations coup for Solomon. It was shrewd politics on Solomon's part. However, political shrewdness has its limits, especially when people rest in it, rather than trusting in the Lord.

[5 : 56] The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and there are times when fearing the Lord might call people to forego the ways of the shrewd politician. As Israel rises as a kingdom, their attention would naturally move beyond their borders.

Where the internal fault lines had once occupied their concern, the international relations would now be much more important to them. However, Israel needed to learn to trust the Lord with these two.

Whether Solomon's taking of an Egyptian queen was an act of significant unbelief is not entirely clear. This chapter is very positive towards Solomon, and most of what he does is characterised by faithfulness and wisdom.

However, it does immediately raise warning signs for us, and it also anticipates many of the ways that Solomon would actually turn away from the ways of the Lord in the future. Turning back to Egypt for weaponry, getting into entangling alliances with pagan peoples, and serving the gods of his foreign wives, all contributed to Solomon's later fall.

His taking of an Egyptian wife could potentially have taken a more positive form, however, and perhaps at this point we are to believe that, rather than sinning, Solomon is taking an action that could go in one of a number of different directions, but which necessitates considerable wisdom and care.

[7 : 09] Lest we forget, Joseph, the great man of wisdom prior to Solomon, had also taken an Egyptian wife. The two great tribes of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, descended from an Egyptian matriarch.

In that case, Joseph had not abandoned the Lord for the ways of Egypt, although it might have seemed likely at some points, especially after he had married an Egyptian woman from a powerful family and had children with her.

As we are told that Solomon loved the Lord, perhaps this is the better way to understand it. At the heart of this chapter is the story of Solomon's request for and receiving of the gift of wisdom.

This episode is a contrast to much of the rest of the material of the book, which focuses on public affairs. This section, however, relates a dream that is of immense importance within the wider story of Solomon.

It makes the source of Solomon's wisdom and wealth plain. They aren't merely the result of Solomon's personal efforts. They come from the hand of the Lord, who has blessed him. This is especially important to remember when we consider the aptness of wisdom for gaining power and wealth.

[8 : 11] If we didn't know the source of Solomon's wisdom, we might easily suppose that Solomon succeeds through his natural aptitudes. Another thing to remember are that there are many ways that wisdom can fail.

God grants Solomon wisdom, but he also grants him success in his wise labours. The mere possession of wisdom is no guarantee, and as we see in the book of Ecclesiastes, wisdom apart from the Lord's blessing can be attended with great frustration.

This is one of two great dreams that Solomon receives in the course of his reign. While prophets tend to receive visions, kings are often said to receive dreams. The second dream comes after the building of the temple.

Solomon receives this dream in Gibeon, which was the great high place. After the capture of the ark, there had not been a single central high place. After the restoration of the ark, as David brought it into Jerusalem and placed it within his tent, the tabernacle was in Gibeon, and the ark of the covenant in David's tent shrine in Jerusalem.

We discover the location of the tabernacle in 1 Chronicles 16, verses 39-40. And he left Zadok the priest and his brothers the priests before the tabernacle of the Lord in the high place that was at Gibeon, to offer burnt offerings to the Lord on the altar of burnt offering regularly, morning and evening, to do all that is written in the law of the Lord that he commanded Israel.

[9 : 32] There were also various high places of worship throughout the land. This was contrary to the instruction of the Lord in Deuteronomy chapter 12, but it was a situation that existed on account of judgment upon the people.

One of Solomon's tasks, as part of the building of the temple, would be the centralization of Israel's worship as the Lord intended. Solomon's dream is received after he sacrificed immense sacrifices on the bronze altar of the tabernacle at Gibeon.

Solomon currently walks in the footsteps of his father David. However, like Isaac as the son of Abraham, Solomon recognized that his father enjoyed a special relationship with God, which he did not yet enjoy in the same way.

Genesis chapter 26, verses 2 to 5, described the character of the Lord's blessing of Isaac on account of Abraham. And the Lord appeared to him and said, Do not go down to Egypt. Dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land. And I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands. And I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father.

[10 : 36] I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws.

Isaac is being blessed chiefly on account of the faithfulness of his father. And Solomon is in a similar position, which he expresses by speaking of the blessings that he is enjoying in a way that traces them back to the Lord's blessing of David, his father.

Solomon, however, finding himself in this situation of great blessing given to his father, a man of great spiritual stature, recognizes how difficult it is to fill his father's shoes.

He no longer has his father to counsel him as he had once counseled him concerning the establishment of his kingdom in chapter two. Now he is on his own. He's faced with the immense responsibilities of ruling the Lord's people.

Unless he is equipped for the task and rises to sufficient spiritual stature himself, he will fail to maintain his father's legacy. Consequently, when the Lord asks Solomon what he desires, Solomon requests an understanding mind for the task that the Lord has given to him.

[11 : 46] He asked to discern between good and evil. This request is a request for the knowledge of good and evil associated with the forbidden tree in the garden. Adam and Eve wanted to eat of that tree so that they might be like gods, like the angelic authorities in the heavens.

The knowledge of good and evil is something that is enjoyed by the mature. It is something that equips one to rule. The king needs wisdom and this knowledge of good and evil. It is reasonable to assume that the Lord had always desired for Adam and Eve to grow into enjoyment of the knowledge of good and evil, but that they had to learn how to serve before they would be granted the privilege of rule.

Now, however, the king is granted the knowledge of good and evil by the Lord. He will, as Peter Lighthouse notes, wake up from his deep sleep with Lady Wisdom by his side as a helper suitable for his task.

He had his dream at Gibeon in the site of the temple and after his dream, he goes up to Jerusalem to the tent where the Ark of the Covenant is. David, after receiving the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel chapter 7, had done something similar.

He had gone in to sit before the Lord. In both cases, this seems to be an indication of the Lord's exaltation of the person. The Lord will elevate Solomon and Solomon has the real possibility of walking in the footsteps of David and enjoying immense blessings, not merely for the sake of his father David, but also for his own sake.

[13:07] Solomon's wisdom is demonstrated in the episode that follows, with the two prostitutes and the surviving child. David might have made a similar judgment between Mephibosheth and Zeba on his return to the land after the defeat of Absalom's coup.

Solomon exhibits insight into human nature in this judgment. He appreciates the importance of envy and rivalry in such situations. Indeed, the very moment that the true mother concedes the possession of the child to her rival, the false mother calls for the child to be chopped in two.

The false mother values dispossessing her rival of her child over both the child's life and her own possession of it. In Solomon's deep insight into human nature, he shows that he can distinguish with shrewdness between good and evil in situations where it is far from obvious.

Peter Lighthouse suggests that there might be something more going on here too. He observes the similarities with the story of the binding of Isaac and the staying of the knife that is about to kill the child.

It is also a story with similarities to the story of the Exodus and the Passover with the death of the child at night. Beyond this, however, it might be a symbolic presentation of the story of the kingdom as it will play out.

[14:16] We find a similar symbolic story in chapter 13. There are two prostitutes, two unfaithful women, corresponding to Israel and Judah. They both claim the seed for themselves, but the Lord will finally remove the seed from the woman who cares more about defeating her rival than she does about the life of the seed.

A question to consider. Solomon feels keenly the challenge of walking in the footsteps of a man as great as his father. Many of us are called to follow in the footsteps of persons far greater than we feel that we are.

How can we learn from Solomon's example in this chapter?