

Solomon: Love Him or Hate Him?

A Tale of Wisdom, Wealth, and Lots of Women

By Tim Mackie

King Solomon is one of the more familiar kings of ancient Israel. He was the second son of David and Bathsheba, and he expanded Israel's borders and economy more than any king in Israel's history. You can find the story of Solomon in 1 Kings 1-11. His name is derived from the Hebrew word for "peace" (pronounced shalom), and peace, as a matter of fact, is one of the things he's remembered for. There were no major wars for the majority of his reign. The biblical authors look back on this time as a period of abundance: "*Thus Judah and Israel lived in security, everyone under their own vine and fig tree from Dan to Beer-sheba, as long as Solomon lived.*" (1 Kings 5:5)

Solomon must have been an amazing king for God to have blessed his reign with such wealth and peace, right? You could be forgiven for thinking so, as many of the stories about him extol his wisdom, wealth, and the enormous size of his kingdom. However, there is more than meets the eye when it comes to the glorious reign of Solomon. Way more, actually.

The story of Solomon is a perfect example of the brilliant subtlety of the biblical authors. Instead of coming out and saying "So and so was really amazing, and they did everything right in the eyes of God," more often, they simply present you with the choices of a biblical character and then show you the outcome. Instead of wrapping it up with a tidy moral summary, you are left to ponder and reflect on what was good in the character and what was lacking.

How it all started

David's Charge to Solomon

The story of Solomon begins with David on his deathbed, giving Solomon a final charge to remain faithful to the covenant between God and Israel

When the time of David's death drew near, he gave these instructions to Solomon, his son: "I am going the way of all the earth. Be strong and be a man! Keep the mandate of the LORD, your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, commands, ordinances, and decrees as they are written in the law of Moses, that you may succeed in whatever you do, and wherever you turn, and that the LORD may fulfill the word he spoke concerning me: If your sons so conduct themselves that they walk before me in faithfulness with their whole heart and soul, there shall never be wanting someone of your line on the throne of Israel. (1 Kings 2:1-4)

We're soon told that "*Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David*" (1 Kings 3:3), but this appears right after we discover he "*Solomon allied himself by marriage with Pharaoh, king of Egypt. He married the daughter of Pharaoh and brought her to the City of David*" (1 Kings 3:1). What? Can that possibly be a good idea?! How can Solomon do something like that and then receive the narrator's praise that he loves the Lord? Maybe he can maintain his allegiance to the God of Israel while negotiating a marriage alliance with Egypt (maybe they've changed since enslaving Israel for over 400 years)... But I doubt it. You see the effects already. The full verse of 1 Kings 3:3 is "*Although Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father, he offered sacrifice and burned incense on the high places.*" The compromises have already started.

Solomon then has a dream (1 Kings 3:5-15) in which God offers him anything he wants. What a deal! Instead of asking for money or power, he asks for wisdom so that he can rule the people of Israel with integrity. God is so pleased with this response that he gives him wisdom in spades, along with wealth and

power besides. This is the context of the famous--and odd--story about the two women who come to Solomon, each claiming to be the mother of a certain child (1 Kings 3:16-28). It's an illustration of his wisdom; he's a man who can see beneath the surface and discern people's motives and character.

Wow, I guess I was wrong about Solomon. This guy's legit.

Next comes a list of Solomon's officials (1 Kings 4), which makes sense. If he's going to expand the kingdom he needs a solid, centralized governing team. So we read the list and happen upon a certain "*Ahishar, master of the palace; and Adoniram, son of Abda, in charge of the forced labor.*" (1 Kings 4:6). Wait, what?! Slave labor? Among the Israelites? I thought slavery was a thing of Israel's past, left behind in Egypt, something to which one Israelite was never to subject another? But here's Solomon, conscripting Israelites into forced labor (the Hebrew word is *mas*, the same word used to describe Israel's enslavement to the Egyptians, see Exodus 1:11).

We're not sure how we feel about this, but we quickly see the fruits of all this labor, nevertheless: everybody's happy in Israel, eating and drinking (1 Kings 4:20) and enjoying the benefits of the large tax-tributes coming in from Israel's neighbors (1 Kings 4:21). With all that cash, Solomon was able to feed royal staff on fat cattle, sheep, deer, gazelles, roebucks, and choice fowl (1 Kings 4:23). He had four thousand stalls for his chariot horses, and twelve thousand horses (1 Kings 4:26). I guess he needs all that if he's gonna have a standing army to protect those giant borders...

God's House and Solomon's House

Solomon is probably known the best for sponsoring and overseeing the construction of the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6-8). Much of this section reads like those detailed blueprints you read about the sacred tabernacle built in the time of Moses (see Exodus 25-31). This is great for God to dwell among his people in an elaborate and ornate structure. And this building is over the top. For example, the "most holy space" (or, "holy of holies") in the tabernacle was a perfect cube (10 cubits squared), but Solomon's was double the size (20 cubits squared! See 1 Kings 6:20). He made two more giant, golden cherubim to overshadow the two that were already on top of the ark (1 Kings 6:23-28). This is such a great space, surely it's all for honoring the reputation of the God of Israel. We're told at the conclusion of the building account, that "Solomon spent seven years building the temple" (1 Kings 6:38).

That's a lot of time. Then we read the next verse: "*To finish the building of his own house Solomon took thirteen years*" (1 Kings 7:1)

How are you supposed to take a statement like that? Is it just a statement of fact, no judgment attached? Or is it a subtle critique exposing that Solomon's wisdom was only skin-deep, and that his ego is expanding along with his kingdom? You have to keep reading...

Solomon builds his massive palace, as well as a palace for the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Kings 7:1-12), don't forget about her. Solomon then furnishes the temple (1 Kings 7-8) and dedicates the entire facility with a beautiful prayer and an elaborate ceremony of praise and worship. God seems to approve of it all, because his divine glorious presence comes to fill the temple in the form of a cloud (1 Kings 8:10-11), just as it filled the tabernacle in the time of Moses (remember Exodus 40:35-40).

So maybe the slavery and marriage to Pharaoh's daughter weren't that big of a deal. Surely God has endorsed Solomon's kingdom...

Wait for it.

Another Dream and a Surprise Visit

Solomon then has another visionary dream (1 Kings 9:1-9). God warns him to offer wholehearted allegiance and not follow after the gods of Israel's neighbors. Otherwise, "this temple will become a heap of rubble" (1 Kings 9:8), which would be a shame. It's so fancy!

After the second dream we're given a long list of additional accomplishments by Solomon. There's the slave labor force he built (1 Kings 9:15). There's Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who attacked the city of Gezer, burned all its inhabitants to death, then offered it as a wedding gift to his daughter when she married Solomon (1 Kings 9:16-17). We're told of the enormous amounts of gold Solomon's fleet of ships regularly brought in (1 Kings 9:26-28).

You know the question to ask by this point: Is this all supposed to impress us or make us suspicious?

To top it all off, we find a long story about the queen of Sheba, who traveled from afar to witness Solomon's wisdom and wealth (1 Kings 10:1-13). She brings gifts of gold, spices, precious stones, and is totally blown away by the size and scope of his palace. This leads to one final list of Solomon's splendor (1 Kings 10:14-29). This list references the huge golden shields Solomon placed all over his palace; the large throne of ivory and gold, flanked by huge lions; and the huge fleet of horses he imported from Egypt on a regular basis. You know, the kind of imports any ancient near eastern king would want.

Surely, we're supposed to admire this man. He asked for wisdom and God gave him wealth and success as well. This is the wisdom of Proverbs at work, right? Love God, honor him, and he will hook you up! That's what this story is about, right? Be a good person, like Solomon, and God will fulfill your wildest dreams...

Again, you could be forgiven for taking this lesson away from Solomon's story, if you hadn't read the entire story from Genesis through 2 Samuel up to this point. However, you already know a thing or two about the human heart from the biblical authors' point of view. And you should also have called to mind a really important law that Moses gave Israel about how its future kings were to behave.

When you have come into the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, should you then decide, "I will set a king over me, like all the surrounding nations," you may indeed set over you a king whom the LORD, your God, will choose. Someone from among your own kindred you may set over you as king; you may not set over you a foreigner, who is no kin of yours. But he shall not have a great number of horses; nor shall he make his people go back again to Egypt to acquire many horses, for the LORD said to you, Do not go back that way again. Neither shall he have a great number of wives, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he accumulate a vast amount of silver and gold. (Dt 17:14-17)

Solomon broke nearly every detail of this law, right down to the horses from Egypt! Now you can see why the biblical author of 1 Kings 1-10 went into all that detail. Solomon was a mixed character, like all the characters we've met so far. If you're wondering where all these decisions led Solomon, just turn the page to Chapter 1. Here is just the beginning:

"His marriage alliance didn't end with Egypt. It led to many (hundreds!) more, and eventually all these marriages turned his heart away from full allegiance to the God of Israel. All that wealth and abundance that you thought was a sign of divine blessing looks very different now. It looks like a sad story of slow compromise, leading to disaster." (1 Kings 11:4-8)

We find ourselves back at square one: Saul was the first king to fall, then David's moral compromise, and now Solomon. As you read on to 1 and 2 Kings, you'll see that all the kings of Israel follow in his

footsteps. And that divine warning about the glorious temple being turned to rubble? It will come true, at the conclusion of the book of 2 Kings chapters 24-25 when Babylon arrives on the scene.

The Take-Away

Solomon had everything going for him, and none of the decisions from early in his reign seemed malicious or ill-intended. But slowly, as he went through life, his heart became insensitive. As a result, his great wisdom that once represented a divine gift became an instrument for self-service and exaltation. It's a realistic depiction of the same character flaw we saw at work in the story of Saul. Self-deception is by definition impossible to spot on your own. You'll never see yourself going down the road of no return. No one ever sets out to ruin their life on purpose, and certainly not to ruin anyone else's, but it happens all the time.

The stories of Solomon stand as yet another warning that we should take our own dark side seriously. It also serves as a sign of hope that God will not let the failures of his people get the final word. His promise to David still stands (remember 2 Samuel 7). If Solomon isn't the promised king who will rule over the nations forever, then when that future king does arrive he will be "like Solomon," minus all of the negative bits. Read [Psalm 72](#), a promise of the future king from the line of David, and tell me that doesn't sound like the promised kingdom! The hope of the future messianic King becomes one more pointer to God's faithfulness in the face of human unfaithfulness. In this way, the bad news about Solomon points forward to the good news of the future that will arrive with King Jesus.