

SOLOMON AND THE SUBTLETY OF IDOLATRY*

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The story of Solomon is well known (1 Kgs 1–11), though some parts are more famous than others. When I was a kid in Sunday School, I remember learning a lot about Solomon’s wisdom and his building the temple. As I grew older, I remember hearing about his thousand wives and great riches. But the idolatry of Solomon was not talked about nearly as much. In reading the story of Solomon in 1 Kgs 1–11, the king’s fall into idolatry is not forecast very clearly. At the beginning of his reign, he appears to be going from “glory to glory” with spectacular achievements one after the other. But when you hit 1 Kgs 11, all the sudden the egregious apostasy and idolatry of the king suddenly are narrated. A first-time reader might say, “I didn’t see that coming!”

It is not just first-time readers that find this quick change surprising. Due to this sudden change, some scholars have suggested that the first part of Solomon’s reign (1 Kgs 1–10) comes from a source(s) that was pro-Solomon (maybe stemming from Solomon’s day) while the negative conclusion (1 Kgs 11) stems from circles (or editors) that were wholly critical of the king (maybe stemming from the time of Babylonian exile and using Solomon’s idolatry as an example of why Yahweh had sent them into exile).¹ The problem with this view is that the later editor, if

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1. Barrick, “Loving Too Well”; Williams, “Once Again”; Parker, “Solomon”; Walsh, “Symmetry”; Porten, “Structure and Theme.” Some redactional theories suggest that the original Deuteronomistic History idealized Solomon. Cf. Kenik, *Design for Kingship*; Knoppers, *Two Nations*, 1:57–134. Some explain the critique of Solomon (1 Kgs 11) as originating in the northern

he wanted to highlight the sins of the kings, might have edited the earlier positive material about Solomon as well if his purpose was to portray Solomon as wholly negative. On the other hand, the progression of the story in 1 Kgs 1–11 may simply reflect the reality of Solomon’s life; that is, he began well but then suddenly fell away in his old age. However, usually this is not what happens in life. One does not walk faithfully with God then suddenly fall away. Usually there is a gradual decline. It could be subtle, but it is there.

In recent scholarship, there has been a move to read the entire story of Solomon as critical of him so that Solomon is a wholly failed king throughout the presentation.² These studies were no doubt a response to pious readings of Solomon that viewed him as wholly good until his sudden fall at the end of his life. While these studies that are critical of Solomon have helpfully highlighted the king’s flaws before the great fall of 1 Kgs 11, in my opinion, they have also ignored positive aspects of his life (and actually argued that even these reflect poorly on him). So, what do we do with Solomon’s story? In this essay, I want to read the story of Solomon in light of the end of the story.

A few months ago, our family watched the movie *The Sixth Sense*. My wife and I had seen the movie back when it came out in 1999, but we wanted to show it to our teen kids. If you have not seen the movie, I am afraid I am going to spoil it a bit here. If you do not want it spoiled maybe jump to the next paragraph. In the movie, the main character is dead the whole time. The movie begins with him getting shot, but the next scene he appears to be alive (we are led to believe he survived the shooting). It is not revealed he is dead, however, until the end of the movie, and it is a *huge* surprise for a first-time viewer. Re-watching the film with

kingdom but that it found its way south to Judah after 722 BCE. Cf. Nicholson, *Deuteronomy and Tradition*, 58–82. Sweeney instead argues the critique of Solomon is from the Josianic edition of the Deuteronomistic History that sought to use Solomon as a foil to highlight Josiah as the ideal king. Cf. Sweeney, “Critique of Solomon.”

2. E.g., Eslinger, *Into the Hands of the Living God*, 123–82; Hays, “Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him?”; Kang, *Persuasive Portrayal of Solomon*; Seibert, *Subversive Scribes*; Jeon, *Impeccable Solomon?*

our kids was an interesting experience. I kept thinking my kids were going to guess he was dead. But they did not! Having known that he was dead the whole time, when I watched it a second time, it seemed so obvious! But when I watched the movie the first time, I did not see it at all. I suggest it is the same with Solomon's story. If we read the story again in light of its tragic conclusion, the story forecasts its miserable end. Reading Solomon's story in light of his fall into idolatry, we can see his gradual descent into idolatry earlier in the story. Some have even suggested this was the purposeful strategy of the narrator.³ Rather than understanding the story to be a bifurcated presentation dependent on sources with different views of the king, I suggest the narrator subtly portrays Solomon's descent into idolatry. In the end, the story of Solomon will allow us to reflect on the subtly of idolatry in a believer's life.

Solomon Marries an Egyptian Princess (1 Kgs 3:1)

Following the story of his consolidation of his reign in 1 Kgs 1–2, wherein some ethically questionable actions take place (partly due to his carrying out the death bed instructions of his father David), Solomon's first really independent action is to marry the Pharaoh's daughter. There is a lot of debate over this marriage! Some view it as critical of Solomon while others think it reflects well on him.

The marriage to the Egyptian princess is a sign of an alliance with Egypt. While this might look good politically for Solomon, in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was not supposed to make alliances with foreign nations but was to always rely on their God for their security. Thus, this marriage might seem a move away from trust in God. What is more, in marrying into the Pharaoh's family, he seems to be joining with the enemy! In fact, some scholars argue that the Pharaoh symbolizes evil oppression.⁴ After all, God brought the people *out of Egypt* to flee the

3. Jeon, "Retroactive Re-Evaluation Technique."

4. E.g., McConville, "Narrative and Meaning," 35; Wiseman, *First and Second Kings*, 82; Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 43–45; Eslinger, *Into the*

Pharaoh. Now Solomon has joined the oppressor! Take Brueggemann's comment for example: "Pharaohs are the same in Israelite imagination, and they are all a threat to Israel. But now, through the wedding, they have become 'family.' Solomon has allied himself with Pharaoh, the antithesis of everything Israelite."⁵

On the other hand, there is no explicit critique by the narrator of this marriage. Some point to the fact that, in the ancient Near Eastern world, the Pharaoh hardly ever allowed a daughter to marry a foreign ruler. It was a great honour to be able to do so. Thus, in its original context, it probably reflects well on Solomon.⁶ What is more, it is open to question whether the Pharaoh is always viewed negatively in the Old Testament. The Pharaoh in Joseph's day seemed to be a positive figure (Gen 41–50). Joseph married an Egyptian.⁷ Also, in Exod 2:5–10, the Pharaoh's daughter is portrayed positively,⁸ and in Num 12:1, Moses is said to have married a Cushite (as Cushites are closely related to Egypt and even ruled as Pharaohs for some time). Besides, while Deuteronomy warned Israelites not to marry "Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites" (Deut 7:1–3), they are *not* forbidden from marrying Egyptians.

In trying to determine whether this was a sinful move by Solomon or perhaps a good strategic move, we might ask where Solomon crosses the line in his marriages to foreign women. When I was a teenager, my friends and I often talked about "fow far you can go?" This often was in thinking about physical contact in dating (could I sit close? hold hands? hug? kiss?)—how far was too far? Where would I cross the line into sin? As we survey Solomon's life, we could keep this same question in mind. When did Solomon cross the line into sin in his life? Was

Hands of the Living God, 129; Hays, "Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him?" 161.

5. Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 45

6. Fritz, *1 and 2 Kings*, 34; Lasine, "King of Desire," 90. Cf. Cohen, "Solomon."

7. E.g., Lasine, "King of Desire," 90.

8. Lasine, "King of Desire," 90.

Solomon crossing the line in this marriage? Was he approaching the line? If we read this marriage notice in light of the end of the story—where Solomon’s foreign wives lead him astray—perhaps we would view this negatively. Perhaps this is a bit of a giveaway of the conclusion. Something you only pick up after reading the end (like re-watching *The Sixth Sense*).

Solomon’s Love for Yahweh and Worship on High Places
(1 Kgs 3:2–3)

Following the marriage notice, we are told Solomon “loved Yahweh” (1 Kgs 3:3). While the marriage likely should be viewed negatively, his piety and love for God is emphasized here. Solomon is clearly a complex character: he loves Yahweh although he married a foreign princess. Some interpreters discount this reference to Solomon’s “love” for God since the context suggests that this too is critical of him. After all, right *before* this statement of his “love” for God, he marries an Egyptian (3:1), and right *after*, Solomon sacrifices at a high place (3:4). Hays suggests, “the narrator is being subtle” and “a bit sarcastic” in that Solomon shows his love for Yahweh by marrying the Pharaoh’s daughter (3:1) and worshipping at the high places (3:2, 4).⁹ It seems unlikely to me, however, that this statement about Solomon’s love for God should be taken as sarcasm. First, worship at the high places was not deemed sinful until the temple was built (after which they were supposed to worship only at the temple). Second, Solomon’s sacrifice at the high place of Gibeon (3:4) clearly pleases Yahweh, who responds to his worship there by offering to give Solomon whatever he might ask of him (3:5). Rather than attempting to make Solomon’s love for Yahweh ironic or a critique, it seems more likely it is a straightforward statement by the narrator. He may have made the mistake of marrying the Pharaoh’s daughter, but Solomon loved Yahweh. Solomon is clearly presented as a complex character in this chapter.

9. Hays, “Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him?” 162.

Solomon's Wisdom (1 Kgs 3:4–15)

After Solomon's sacrifices are offered at the high place, God appears to him in a dream and says to the fledgling king, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you" (1 Kgs 3:5).¹⁰ What an amazing opportunity! What would you ask for in that situation? A fun topic of discussion when I was a kid was what you would ask for if you found a genie in a bottle. Most of us would say to ask for unlimited wishes (though in the end we agreed this would not be a legitimate request). Frequently a request for superpowers would be high on the list, then maybe money or the like. What we would ask probably says something about what we are like.

The story is told of a man at his workplace who stumbles upon an old lamp while cleaning. He gives it a good polish, and a genie pops out. The genie informs him that he gets three wishes, but there is a catch: whatever he wishes for, his boss gets double since it was originally his boss's lamp. The man makes his first wish: "I'd like a million dollars." The genie responds: "Sure, but your boss will receive two million." The man shrugs: "That's alright. For my second wish, I want a grand mansion on a secluded tropical island." The genie nods: "Your boss will then get two grand mansions." Finally, the man smirks and says: "For my third wish, I want you to donate one of my kidneys."

What someone would ask for in this situation tells us something about their character. Do they want revenge? Power? Riches? What Solomon asks for tells us something about his character. In 1 Kgs 3:9, Solomon asks God, "Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" Solomon does not ask for revenge, money, or power! He asks for wisdom! In other words, Solomon is not characterized here as a vengeful, ambitious, evil, or self-centred person. Solomon was clearly concerned with others and how to rule the people wisely. In my view, it is hard to argue Solomon is wholly a negative character at this point.

10. Unless otherwise indicated, scriptural quotations are in NIV.

God responds to Solomon's request by not only giving wisdom but also giving him what he *did not* ask for as well: wealth, fame, and power. This needs to be kept in mind as we read the story. These things were given to him by God so they must be good gifts. But later on, we will see that Solomon misuses these gifts. Again, we have to ask, "Where did Solomon cross the line?"

Why Would God Give Solomon Riches and Honour?

Some question why God would give Solomon these gifts (especially since he did not ask for them). Did this not just cause more problems for the king? Was this meant to test Solomon? We are never told as much in the text. Some suggest these gifts were to help him rule justly. After all, Aristotle said that a king needed great wealth and power in order to rule justly. He claimed that a king should be "better supplied with goods of every kind than his subjects" so that he "lacks nothing," so that he "will not study his own interests but those of his subjects" (*Eth. nic.* 1160a35–b5).¹¹ Aristotle's claim is a bit suspect, however. In fact, Plato completely disagreed and argued that, in order to be just, a king must be kept from having extensive riches. Plato argued that for kings "it is not lawful to handle and to touch gold and silver, nor to go under the same roof with it, nor to hang it from their persons, nor to drink from silver or gold."¹² As Epicurus puts it, "Nothing satisfies the man who is not satisfied with a little."¹³ Other interpreters have taken God to task for these gifts to Solomon and even assigned him partial blame for Solomon's downfall. For example, Lasine suggests that God is "tempting Solomon with dangerous gifts which he knows are certain to make the king insatiable and sinful" and concludes that Yahweh "should have known better."¹⁴ However, this assessment contra-

11. Rackham, *Aristotle*, 491 (quoted in Lasine, "King of Desire," 92). Lasine also notes that the German philosopher Schopenhauer and Dante both share Aristotle's opinion in this regard.

12. Bloom, *Republic*, 96 (quoted in Lasine, "King of Desire," 95).

13. Bailey, *Epicurus*, 137 (quoted in Lasine, "King of Desire," 96).

14. Lasine, "King of Desire," 87, 113. Similarly, Eslinger, *Into the Hands of the Living God*, 137.

dicts God's character as revealed elsewhere it in Scripture. James 1:13–14 is clear that God does not tempt people: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." God is not responsible for our sinful choices.

A better answer might be found in the book of Proverbs where it states that wisdom has "riches and honor are in her left hand" (Prov 3:16). Since God granted Solomon wisdom, perhaps riches and honour followed as well. In the end, the Scriptures do not tell us why God gave Solomon these gifts that he did not ask for. Sometimes there is a mystery about God, and not all answers to our questions are given. But knowing God's character, I think that the best explanation is that God loves to give good gifts to his children (Matt 7:11). These gifts to Solomon were an act of his grace. What we do with God's gifts is our responsibility.

Solomon's Wisdom Displayed (1 Kgs 3:16–28)

Following the story of God granting Solomon wisdom comes the famous story of the two prostitutes who come to Solomon for a judgment. One woman had accidentally killed her baby by rolling over on it while she slept, so she swapped her dead baby for the second woman's baby in the middle of the night. Now both women claimed the living baby as their own. Solomon famously declares that they should cut the baby in half so they can share it (1 Kgs 3:25). This, of course, leads the real mother to concede the baby to the other woman because she would never want her child to come to harm (v. 26). In this way, Solomon discerns that she is the baby's real mother. The result of the incident is that people are blown away by the wisdom God had given Solomon (1 Kgs 3:28).

Some scholars, however, suggest that even this story critiques Solomon. Hays points out that Solomon does not deal with the underlying issue here—prostitution. He writes, "Solomon doesn't even mention that their very occupation [prostitution] that produced this child was a violation of the law of Yahweh

that he as king was bound to uphold and enforce.”¹⁵ Reading this story in light of the end of Solomon’s reign (like re-watching *The Sixth Sense*), we might be suspicious of the story here. Can Solomon really be delivering justice if he ignores this law? What is more, later on, Solomon sins in the area of sex (1 Kgs 11:1–3) and of abuse of power (12:4), both of which are endemic to the sinful practice of prostitution.¹⁶ Perhaps reading this story in light of its conclusion creates some ambiguity with regard to Solomon’s character even here where his wisdom is displayed. Solomon may be turning a blind eye to oppression and sexual sin—somewhat forecasting his downfall at the end.

Solomon’s Great Kingdom: Competent or Oppressive?
(1 Kgs 4–5)

The extensive description of Solomon’s kingdom in 1 Kgs 4:1–19 is likely meant to impress the reader. His government is so well-organized and spectacular! The lengthy lists of officials, officers, and bureaucrats are remarkable. Reading this in light of the end of Solomon’s reign, however, might make the reader wonder whether this picture of Solomon’s organizational glory praises him or criticizes him as oppressive. The taxing of the people is mentioned in 1 Kgs 4:7, 22–23. Are these appropriate levies or are these oppressive measures? Are these acquisitions of funds simply part of what it takes to build the temple and to make Israel a secure nation? Or do these references to Solomon’s organizational glory criticize him as implementing an oppressive bureaucracy on the people?¹⁷

15. Hays, “Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him?” 164.

16. Hays (“Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him?” 165) further points out that most of the references to prostitution in the Bible are figurative uses to refer to idolatry and apostasy—the sins which Solomon falls into in his old age.

17. Some might point back to the warning of the prophet Samuel about the way a monarch will act. He warned, “Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves” (1 Sam

In 1 Kgs 5, we are told about how Solomon conscripted labourers from Israel to work in Lebanon to get cedar for his building projects like the temple. The conditions of their labour entail shifts where “they spent one month in Lebanon and two months at home” (1 Kgs 5:14). Yet there is debate over whether this situation was fair or exploitative. While most have concluded that this arrangement was quite generous,¹⁸ especially in the context of the ancient world, others demure. For example, Eric Siebert finds even these seemingly humane conditions (two months of rest for each month of work) oppressive since the worker still had to be gone for four months a year. He writes, “It is difficult to imagine how anyone forced to work away from home four months out of the year would view that arrangement as ‘generous.’”¹⁹ Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but such opinions probably reflect one’s life experience. I know that my grandfather worked in the bush and was gone to live in the bush six days a week, coming home for one day to be with his family. Similarly, many serving in the military are often gone for long periods of time, and long-haul truckers are often gone from family for extended periods. *One month gone and two months back* is not bad—especially in the ancient world.

The problem is that, if we read what happens shortly after Solomon dies, we find that the Israelites at that point complain that Solomon had been too harsh on them with his labour policies. In 1 Kgs 12:4, they complain to Solomon’s son, “Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you.” If they are telling the truth, this seems to show that Solomon eventually was an oppressor of his people. However, it is hard to know how to judge the claims of these angry Israelites. Should we trust their opinion as fact? After all, this is *not* the opinion of the narrator (who we would always trust) but of a disgruntled people. It is

8:16–17). There is some debate over whether Samuel’s description of the monarchy is necessarily presenting it negatively or whether he is simply describing what a king will need in order to rule.

18. Fretheim, *First and Second Kings*, 38.

19. Siebert, *Subversive Scribes*, 170.

worth noting that they basically say, “Lighten up a bit, and we’ll serve you for life.” It is hardly a “Let my people go!” type of demand. They seem happy to keep “serving” but are asking for an improvement in conditions. Many modern interpreters think the people’s complaints are legitimate probably because they think Solomon’s wealth and commercial success had to be due to his unlawful oppression of the people. But human nature is to complain about leaders and impositions (even legitimate ones) placed on those subjects to their leadership. The story of Solomon as told thus far would suggest that the people’s complaints were baseless. The narrator in 1 Kgs 4:21 tells us that Israel was “happy” under Solomon’s tenure. The queen of Sheba later will similarly say, “Happy are your people and happy are your servants” (1 Kgs 10:8). So, what are we to make of these later statements of the people in 1 Kgs 12:4? Well, one thing is clear—they are no longer happy! At some point along the way, they stopped being happy about the situation under Solomon. But it is unclear exactly when that was. Again, we have ambiguity. At what point did Solomon’s administration of appropriate state labour become oppressive? Where did Solomon cross the line?

Shiny Happy People? (1 Kgs 4:20–21)

After listing all the people working in Solomon’s administration, the narrator gives an explicit assessment of public sentiment during the early reign of Solomon: “The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy. And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt.” (1 Kgs 4:20–21a). Things sound quite good. The people ate, drank, and were happy! In fact, the language used in this verse purposefully recalls the promises to Abraham back in Genesis where God had promised him that he was giving them the land “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates” (Gen 15:18) and that his descendants would be “as numerous as the sand on the seashore” (Gen 22:17). Finally, under Solomon’s rule, Israel has grown to the promised proportions and receives the entire promised land.

But this picture of a happy people may be only one part of the story. Immediately following this, the narrator describes the lavish provisions for Solomon's court.

Solomon's daily provisions were thirty cors [150 bushels] of fine flour and sixty cors [300 bushels] of meal, ten head of stall-fed cattle, twenty of pasture-fed cattle and a hundred sheep and goats, as well as deer, gazelles, roebucks and choice fowl. (1 Kgs 4:22–23)

That is a lot of food! Sometimes I wonder if the pictures we see of Solomon in art are way off the mark. Solomon is always pictured as slim and trim, but maybe he was a bit more *minivan* than *sportscar* (more Henry the VIII than Justin Trudeau). But regardless of Solomon's girth, some interpreters suggest this is a picture *not* of blessing but of "extravagance and self-indulgence."²⁰ This suggestion carries a bit of weight (pun intended) when the following verse is read: "During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree" (1 Kgs 4:24). The juxtaposition of the average Israelite's vegetarian diet (vine and fig tree) with the exorbitant Solomonic banquets of meat is quite the contrast. Possibly the narrator provides a purposeful contrast between the opulence of Solomon and the subsistence living of the common citizen. But again, there is some ambiguity here. The text does say Israel was happy.

The band REM had a famous song back in the early 1990s named "Shiny, Happy, People"²¹ which on first listen sounds like a joyous light-hearted pop song. The song, however, was supposed to be ironic and was inspired by the horrific slaughter at Tiananmen Square, China. They took the phrase "Shiny, Happy, People" from Chinese propaganda posters that attempted to tell the world a different story about what was going on in China. Some interpreters of Solomon read this text as if it were REM's hit song. That is, the text says they were happy, but really this was simply covering up the fact that things were not as good as it seemed. Solomon was living a life of self-indulgence on the

20. E.g., Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 62

21. REM, "Shiny, Happy, People."

backs of his people. But when did Solomon cross the line from enjoying God's good gifts to taking advantage of his position at the expense of his people? This is ambiguous and somewhat impossible to determine with any certainty.²²

Solomon's Temple (1 Kgs 5–9)

Besides his wisdom, Solomon is probably most famous for his construction of the temple. In fact, the first temple is referred to using his name ("Solomon's Temple"). First Kings 5 describes the details of Solomon's labour force that he marshalled to work on the temple. Chapters 6–7 describe the temple in its opulence and splendour. So much gold! So many precious commodities sunk into its construction! The reader, no doubt, is to be impressed by the glorious and beautiful temple being built. Most readers find the building of the temple to be a good thing that Solomon did. But some interpreters think even the temple reflects poorly on Solomon! Some suggest that the building of the temple is an example of what sociologists call "conspicuous consumption"—that is, the spending of money and resources in ostentatious ways so that you look wealthy.²³ They argue that Solomon lavished the temple with such expensive elements so that he would look rich and powerful. Other scholars critique the temple project claiming that its construction "drained the nation's wealth while providing only a temporary appearance of strength and grandeur."²⁴

In my opinion, these critiques of the temple fail to appreciate the value and worth of the temple for the ancient faith community.²⁵ The money and resources spent on the temple made it

22. Brueggemann argues that we cannot be certain if 1 Kgs 4:25 "is a serious statement of state policy or if it is heavy-handed propaganda or if it is subtle, critical irony" ("Vine and Fig Tree," 198).

23. E.g., Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 87. He further calls the temple merely an "ornament of the dynasty" (127).

24. De Vries, *1 Kings*, 133.

25. In the search for further critique of Solomon Hays ("Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him?" 170) suggests the fact that Solomon does not dance before the ark critiques the king (in light of David's having

beautiful—and that had an important purpose. It pointed to something greater. The beauty of the temple was for God’s glory! The psalmist says: “How *lovely* is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD” (Ps 84:1–2). The temple needed to be beautiful to reflect the beauty of the Lord. The critique of these scholars reminds me of Matt 26, when a woman came and poured a bottle of very expensive perfume on Jesus’ head. Like these scholars, Jesus’ disciples were not impressed. They said, “‘Why this waste? This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor’” (Matt 26:8–9). Jesus, however, defended her actions and claimed she had done a “beautiful thing” for him and that her deed will be retold wherever the gospel is preached (26:13). Similarly, I think, the lavish, opulent temple that Solomon built was a “beautiful” thing built *not* for humans but for God. Like the woman anointing Jesus with perfume, the story of Solomon’s extravagant building continues to be told wherever the gospel is preached.

The narrative of First Kings does note, however, that Solomon took nearly twice as long to build his own palace as he did the temple (1 Kgs 6:38; 7:1) which many have seen as a critique of the king. Maybe this points to misaligned priorities showing that the king cared more about his own house than God’s house. But the statement is ambiguous. The fact that he got the temple done quicker could show how he prioritized the temple and thus completed the project much sooner than his palace. Again, there is a level of ambiguity. As with the statements regarding his abundant provisions and banquets, we might ask: Where exactly did Solomon cross the line from receiving God’s blessing to pursuing luxury and self-indulgence? The time spent on his own house *could* indicate this, but it is unclear.

done so). Of course, David is the only character in the Bible to do this, so this is a rather weak critique as it would also critique every other character in the Bible. Characters are allowed their own dispositions and personalities, and dancing exuberantly may not have been in Solomon’s personal expressive repertoire.

The Visit of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1–10)

We are almost getting to the end of the story where Solomon falls away (1 Kgs 11). But before that, he has a visitor—the queen of Sheba. Here we have an eyewitness to Solomon’s success and the status of his kingdom. What she sees is said to literally “take her breath away” (וְלֹא־הָיָה בָּהּ עוֹד רוּחַ) (1 Kgs 10:5). As noted above, she claims that all of Solomon’s men and servants are “happy.” She further claims that Solomon is maintaining “justice and righteousness” (10:9). This is quite high praise from the foreign dignitary. But some are not convinced. Reading the story in light of the later complaints made by the Israelites regarding Solomon’s labour policies, some scholars suggest that her comments should be taken as ironic.²⁶ Their claim is that there was no justice and righteousness being maintained in Solomon’s land and that it was oppressive injustice that ruled the day. In my opinion, this reading is unlikely. Her comments seem like a straightforward compliment. However, it is possible that everything looked good from her outsider perspective but that there was some rot underneath. At what point did Solomon’s fair treatment of workers turn into oppressive practices? We do not know.

Solomon’s Gold (1 Kgs 10:14–21)

Right before we read that terrible conclusion about Solomon’s great fall, the narrator chronicles the amazing amount of gold that the king acquired. We are told:

The weight of the gold which Solomon received yearly was 666 talents [20,000 kgs] . . . The king also made a large throne of ivory, and he overlaid it with refined gold . . . No such throne was ever made for any other kingdom. All King Solomon’s drinking cups were of gold, and all the utensils of the Lebanon Forest House were of pure gold: silver did not count for anything in Solomon’s days. (1 Kgs 10:14–21)

26. Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 134; Seibert, *Subversive Scribes*, 178; Fretheim, *First and Second Kings*, 60.

That is a lot of gold! Of course, on the one hand, God had promised him riches, so we might not read this as problematic. However, there is a law in Deuteronomy that is important to take into account here. Deuteronomy 17:16–17, often referred to as the “Law of the King” proscribes a king from accumulation of several items. It reads:

The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, “You are not to go back that way again.” He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

There is some ambiguity to the law. In other words, what does it mean by “great numbers” or “large amounts”? But there seems to be no ambiguity in the description of Solomon’s holdings in 1 Kgs 10. He clearly has accumulated “large amounts” of gold and silver (10:27). What is more, we are told how Solomon sought even more gold! First Kings 10:22 refers to Solomon’s maritime expeditions seeking to acquire even more gold. For the king who initially was not interested in riches but interested in wisdom, there seems to be something of a change of heart here. At what point did Solomon cross the line from enjoying God’s blessing of wealth to his own idolatrous attempt to accumulate precious metals?

This is worth thinking about in our own lives. Where do we cross the line from treating wealth as a blessing from God to be shared with others, to where we now pursue wealth as an end in itself? Where do we cross the line from trusting in God for our future to trusting our own wealth to secure our future? Where is the line?

Solomon’s Horses (1 Kgs 10:26–28)

Not only does Solomon break the “Law of the King” with regard to gold, he also clearly does the same regarding his horses. In 1 Kgs 10:26, we are told that he had 12,000 horses—clearly a lot of steeds! He has so many ponies that he has to dedicate whole “chariot cities” to their keeping (v. 26). What is more, Solomon

is explicitly said to get his horses from Egypt (v. 28)! This specifically violates the law from Deuteronomy which bars accumulating great numbers of horses and forbade getting horses from Egypt.

We might wonder why God forbids the Israelite king from acquiring many horses. We need to realize that, in the ancient world, horses and chariots were basically military weapons. Solomon's horse-trade was building a military complex. God wanted his king to trust in him, not the military. This theological position is evident in Ps 20:7 where the psalmist says, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God." In other words, Solomon's horses revealed a lack of trust in God for protection and a desire to secure his kingdom through his own power. Of course, we might ask when Solomon crossed the line. Which horse crossed the line into too many horses for Solomon? Was it horse number 500? 5,000? 10,000? Again, there is ambiguity.

Solomon's Women (1 Kgs 11:1–3)

Now we finally come to the tragic conclusion and Solomon's fall. Here, famously, Solomon is said to have married 700 foreign princesses and had another 300 concubines as well. The sad statement reads:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which Yahweh had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.

This means that he has now broken all three parts of Deuteronomy's "Law of the King" by taking "many wives" (Deut 17:7). While "many" might be a bit ambiguous in Deuteronomy, there is no ambiguity in Solomon's story. One-thousand women definitely qualifies as many. Not only that, his

wives come from the nations Yahweh had told Israel not to intermarry with. Solomon clearly crossed the line in his marriages.

There are two callbacks to the beginning of Solomon's story here. First, it mentions Pharaoh's daughter again. Remember that, at the beginning (1 Kgs 3:1), the marriage seemed a bit ambiguous, but we were unsure of whether to take it as sinful or not. It seems that the narrator explicitly mentions here again in this context to suggest that the first marriage put him on this trajectory that is now bearing its evil fruit. What is more, while in 1 Kgs 3:3 the narrator noted that Solomon "loved Yahweh," here the narrator states *twice* that now Solomon "loved" these women. Solomon's love for God is now exchanged for his love of foreign women. What is more, in keeping with the prophecy that is the "Law of the King," Solomon's heart is thereby "led astray" (Deut 17:17; 1 Kgs 11:3–4).

Solomon's Idolatry

While some of Solomon's early choices and actions were somewhat ambiguous, there is no longer any ambiguity in 1 Kgs 11. But reading his story in light of the end, I think we can see how the seeds of his demise were sown through his misuse of God's blessing. Ultimately, Solomon succumbed to the classic idols that still reign today. They are what we might call the "unholy trinity" of *money* (gold), *power* (horses), and *sex* (wives and concubines).²⁷ Throughout this essay, we have been asking where exactly it was that Solomon crossed the line into sin. This is a question we must ask ourselves. Where is the line between something being a blessing in our life and the same thing becoming an idol? It is not always clear—just like in the Solomon story! There is ambiguity or indeterminacy both in Solomon's story and in our own. As in Solomon's case, God

27. Parker suggests they represent the sins of "power, prestige and money" which "are indicative of the extent to which Solomon has departed from Torah" ("Solomon," 84). This ignores any sexual aspect to the marrying foreign wives, though the text emphasizes twice that Solomon *loves* them (not just the prestige they bring), which I think implies this carnal aspect.

gives us good things. These things can be enjoyed and used wisely. They can remind us of God's love and care for us. But they can also come to rule our life and turn our hearts away from God. Perhaps instead of asking "How far can I go?" before I cross the line into sin, we should make it our goal to stay as far away from crossing the line as possible. If someone as wise as Solomon can be deceived, so can we!

How did Solomon blow it? He was actually warned all about this. Back in 1 Kgs 2 before the death of his father, in his final words to his son, David urged Solomon (v. 3):

Observe what Yahweh your God requires: Walk in obedience to him, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and regulations, as written in the Law of Moses. Do this so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go.

Solomon clearly ignored Yahweh's commands as evinced by his clear violation of the "Law of the King." But David's advice is relevant to us as well. If we do not want to end up like Solomon, we need to pay attention to God's word. This is what Solomon failed to do. God's word warned him about gold, horses, and multiplying wives. Maybe Solomon thought the rules didn't apply to him or that he was the exception to the rule. Many times, we might rationalize our behaviours similarly, perhaps believing that we are the exception to the rule. But what we sow we will reap (Gal 6:7–8).

Conclusion

The story of Solomon stands as a warning of the temptations and the subtlety of idolatry. They say that idols today are more on the "self" than on the "shelf," but they are no less deadly. In the New Testament, Jesus looks back to the glory days of Solomon, noting Solomon's glorious splendour and says, "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these" (Matt 6:28–29). Jesus acknowledges Solomon's splendour but says a flower is more splendid! The context of this saying is the Sermon the Mount

where Jesus just finished telling his disciples that they cannot serve both God and Money (6:24) and that we need to trust God with their earthly needs (6:25–27). The reference to Solomon in that context is so apt because Solomon sinned with regard to both areas (money and trusting God). In that context, Jesus declares that Solomon’s accomplishments pale in comparison to a flower that God makes beautiful.

Jesus also recalls the visit of the queen of Sheba in Matt 12:42 saying: “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.” Significantly, both of Jesus’ references to Solomon recall Solomon’s greatness and achievements only to say they are *inferior*. Both references are used in a comparison where Solomon is valued less than that to which he is compared. What is more, Jesus is the “one greater than Solomon” (v. 42). Even though Solomon’s reign was glorious and incomparable, the Messiah’s presence is much more important and glorious. Even the richest and wisest of kings cannot compare to the son of God. The true king, Jesus, who is the one greater than Solomon himself, is here. He is worthy of coming from the ends of the earth to hear his wisdom and live. The references to Solomon by Jesus remind us that he is the true king. Nothing else should be on the throne of our life. All who seek wisdom should turn to Jesus, God’s anointed one (Messiah) and find life.

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