



First Kings - Chapter Three

I 1 Kings 1:1-11:43 - The Reign of King Solomon (continues)

Summary of Chapter Three

Although a kind of wisdom has already guided Solomon in his treatment of those who were a threat to him, Chapter 3 confirms that in fact he still lacks a truly wise and discerning mind. The new gift of wisdom that he now receives from God allows him to govern more justly, as the story in vv.16-28 illustrates. This is an account of two women both give birth within a few days of each other. One of the babies dies and so its mother swaps it with the living one. Both women ask the king to decide whose child it is. When Solomon determines that the surviving child should be cut in two, half for each woman, the false mother accepts but the true mother says that the child should live and be given to the other woman. Thus Solomon determines the true mother and gives the child back to her.

I.b 1 Kings 3:1-28 - More on Solomon and Wisdom

Refer to the chapter summary above.

I.b.i 1 Kings 3:1-15 - Solomon's Prayer for Wisdom

Solomon's reign started well enough despite his marriage to an Egyptian princess and the sacrifices he and the people offered to God in unauthorised places. He walked in the ways of God as his father David had done. In a dream he prayed that God would give him the wisdom to rule over God's chosen people. This pleased God and he not only gave Solomon great wisdom, he also bestowed on him great wealth, power and influence, so that he would become a great king.

¹ 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.

1 Kings 3:1

Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh. This is another dubious act to add to those in Chapter 2. Deuteronomy 17:16 warns against a 'return to Egypt' in terms of a relationship that is 'too close' with that nation. The Hebrew verb *khatan*, translated here as 'made a marriage alliance,' is translated 'intermarry' in Deuteronomy 7:3, where the command not to marry foreigners is explicitly tied to a warning that such marriages will lead the people to serve other gods (Deuteronomy 7:4). This becomes all too real for Solomon: <<*Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David*>> (1 Kings 11:3-4). Even though Solomon <<*loved the Lord*>> (v.3), he is a king with a divided heart, failing to keep the Law of Moses wholeheartedly as David had instructed him to do in 1 Kings 2:1-4.

Marriage to fellow royalty was a common political strategy in the ancient world, and continues into the modern age. It was not only because royalty wanted to marry other royalty, but also because conflict between nations was then avoided for the sake of family ties. Such marriages had more to do with politics than for love. Solomon did at least recognise that having a foreign wife caused problems in itself: <<*Solomon brought Pharaoh's daughter from the city of David to the house that he had built for her, for he said, 'My wife shall not live in the house of King David of Israel, for the places to which the ark of the Lord has come are holy'*>> (2 Chronicles 8:11).

This was not Solomon's first marriage. First Kings 14:21 states that his son Rehoboam came to the throne when he was 41 years old, and 1 Kings 11:42 reveals that Solomon reigned for 40 years. This means that Rehoboam was born to his mother - a wife of Solomon named Naamah the Amonitess - before he came to the throne and therefore before he married this daughter of Pharaoh.

Solomon's multiple marriages - and his marriages to many foreign women - would cause a great disaster in his life. Later, in the Book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah was angry and frustrated because the people of Israel married women from the pagan nations around them. In rebuking the guilty, Nehemiah remembered Solomon's bad example: <<*And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not King Solomon of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously*>> (Nehemiah 13:25-27).

The foreign wives made Solomon more than a bad example - they ruined his spiritual life: <<King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the Israelites, 'You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods;' Solomon clung to these in love. Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David>> (1 Kings 11:1-4).

Second Samuel 3:3b reveals that David married the daughter of a foreign king: <<Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur>>. Marrying a foreign woman was not against the Law of Moses - providing she became a convert to the God of Israel, as seen in the story of Ruth, who gave herself to God before she even encountered Boaz. What did not ruin David did ruin Solomon.

Solomon brought her into the city of David. Although this was permitted under the Law of Moses, it was not wise or good for Solomon to do this. Later in his life, his foreign wives were the reason his heart turned away from the Lord as already commented on above.

Old legends from Jewish rabbis say that on their wedding night, the Egyptian princess cast a spell on Solomon and put a tapestry over their bed that looked like the night sky with stars and constellations. The spell was intended to make Solomon sleep, and when he did wake he looked up and thought the stars were still out and it was still night so he went back to sleep. He slept on past 10:00 in the morning and all Israel was grieved because Solomon kept the keys to the temple under his pillow and they could not have the morning sacrifice until he woke up. Finally, his mother Bathsheba roused him from sleep.

² The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord. ³ Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. ⁴ The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt-offerings on that altar.

1 Kings 3:2-4

The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord. At this time, altars were allowed in Israel at various high places, as long as those altars were dedicated to the Lord alone and not corrupted by idolatry, as commanded: <<**You shall not plant any**

tree as a sacred pole beside the altar that you make for the Lord your God>> (Deuteronomy 16:21).

The high places. This is the standard translation of the Hebrew *bamot*, but it is not clear that height, whether natural or artificial, was an intrinsic feature of these worship sites. The idea is simply that of publicly accessible structures, including unenclosed altars and temples with altars, within which or on which offerings were made to God or the gods. The continuation and proliferation of these local places of worship, as opposed to the one place of worship described in Deuteronomy Chapter 12, is one of the main concerns of the authors of 1-2 Kings; refer to 1 Kings 22:43, and 2 Kings 12:3, 14:4, 15:4 and 15:35. Solomon begins by tolerating worship of the Lord at these places and ends up being drawn into full-blown apostasy: *<<Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who offered incense and sacrificed to their gods>>* (1 Kings 11:7-8). His example is later followed by many in Israel and Judah; for example, 1 Kings 12:28-31 and 2 Kings 21:3-9.

Solomon loved the Lord, only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. There is good and bad in this assessment of Solomon. There is good in that generally he walked in the statutes of his father David. There is bad in the word ‘only.’ At the same time, it seems that God showed mercy to those who violated this law before the temple was built. Could there be any sin in this, or was it unlawful until after the temple was built? For prophets, judges, the kings who preceded Solomon, and Solomon himself, sacrificed on high places, such as Gibeon, Gilgal, Shiloh, Hebron, Kiriath-jearim, etc. However, after the temple was erected, it was sinful to offer sacrifices in any other place.

Solomon did love the Lord - yet he also loved foreign wives who eventually helped turn Solomon’s heart away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:4-10). The perils of mixed motives and a divided heart are terrible indeed: <<Love the Lord, all you his saints. The Lord preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily>> (Psalm 31:23).

The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there. Solomon made these special sacrifices at Gibeon because that was the great high place. What made it different was that the tabernacle was there, even though the Ark of the Covenant was in Jerusalem.

Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt-offerings on that altar. This almost grotesque amount of sacrifice demonstrated both Solomon’s great wealth and his heart to use it to glorify God. This was an important event marking the ceremonial beginning of Solomon’s reign. According to 2 Chronicles 1:2-3, the entire leadership of the nation went with Solomon to Gibeon.

The journey of the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant in the Promised Land:

- Joshua brought both the ark and the tabernacle to Shiloh (Joshua Chapter 18).
- In the days of Eli the ark was captured and the tabernacle wrecked by the Philistines (1 Samuel Chapter 4, Psalm 78:60-64, and Jeremiah 7:12 and 26:9).
- The ark came back to Kiriath-Jearim (1 Samuel 7:1-2).
- Saul restored the tabernacle at Nob (1 Samuel Chapter 21).
- Saul moved the tabernacle to Gibeon (1 Chronicles 16:39-40).
- David brought the ark to Jerusalem and built a temporary tent for it (2 Samuel 6:17 and 2 Chronicles 1:4).

There were several reasons to explain why David did not bring the tabernacle from Gibeon to Jerusalem along with the ark:

- He may have believed that if the tabernacle was there the people would be satisfied with that and they would lose the passion and vision to build the temple that God wanted.
- It may be that the tabernacle was only moved when it was absolutely necessary, as when disaster came upon it at Shiloh or Nob.
- David simply focused on building the temple, not continuing with the tabernacle, even though it was of great historic significance.

⁵ At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask what I should give you.' ⁶ And Solomon said, 'You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart towards you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. ⁷ And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸ And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹ Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?'

1 Kings 3:5-9

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night. This remarkable visitation from God happened in a dream. This is one of the more significant dreams in the Bible. Others include Jacob's Dream at Bethel in Genesis 28:10-22,

Joseph's Dreams of Greatness in Genesis 37:1-11, Daniel's visions of Christ coming into heaven in Daniel 7:13-14 and the various dreams of Joseph in Matthew's gospel that told him to remain with Mary when she was pregnant, to flee to Egypt and again when it was time to return.

Ask what I should give you. This was an amazing promise. God seemed to offer Solomon whatever he desired. This was not only because Solomon sacrificed 1,000 animals. It was because his heart was surrendered to God, and God wanted to work something in Solomon through this offer and his response.

The natural reaction to reading this promise of God to Solomon is to wish for such a promise. Christians have such promises:

- <<Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you>> (Matthew 7:7).
- <<If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you>> (John 15:7).
- <<And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us>> (1 John 5:14).

The promise is however dependent on the person asking in faith, walking in the ways of God and being 'in tune' to the will of the Holy Spirit when asking.

You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David. Before responding to God's offer and asking for something, Solomon remembered God's faithfulness to both David and now to Solomon himself.

I am only a little child. Solomon was, of course, not really a child but a man. However, he came to God in great humility, especially considering the task ahead of him. Solomon feels inadequate in view of the great task that confronts him. Although he has used wisdom before in dealing with affairs of state, now he confesses basic ignorance: I do not know how to go out or come in. He needs an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil. He places his trust that God will give him wisdom and spiritual maturity to lead the nation in the way that God would have him do it.

Solomon did not have the false humility that said, "I cannot do this so I will not even try." His attitude was, "The job is so much bigger than me; I must rely on God." This applies to all aspects of church leadership and to an individual's walk with God as well.

Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people. Solomon asked for more than great knowledge; he wanted understanding, and he wanted it in his mind, literally his heart, not merely in his head. Actually, the ancient Hebrew word translated understanding is literally 'hearing'. Solomon wanted a hearing heart, one that would listen to God. In Ephesians 1:18 the

Apostle Paul prayed for Christians, asking that the eyes of their hearts or understanding should be enlightened.

Able to discern between good and evil. Such discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Solomon wanted that specific gift and it is one that many in the church should seek: <<***But strive for the greater gifts***>> (1 Corinthians 12:31a).

For who can govern this your great people? Solomon already understood that a key component of leadership is wise and just discernment. Many leaders do not have this discernment or the courage to use it.

¹⁰ It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹ God said to him, ‘Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹² I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. ¹³ I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴ If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.’

1 Kings 3:10-14

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God was pleased by what Solomon asked for, in that he knew his great need for wisdom, discernment, and understanding. God was also pleased by what Solomon did not ask for, in that he did not ask for riches or fame or power for himself.

Since Solomon did not ask for long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, God gave him what he did not ask for, both riches and honour, and promised to lengthen his days. Significantly, there is no mention of enemies, confirming that Solomon’s ‘wisdom’ in Chapter 2 was of an unenlightened, self-serving kind, which must now be replaced with something higher if he is to rule justly and well over his subjects. It is the fear of the Lord that is the true beginning of wisdom: <<***And he said to humankind, “Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding”***>> (Job 28:28), <<***The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practise it have a good understanding. His praise endures for ever***>> (Psalm 111:10), and: <<***The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honour***>> (Proverbs 15:33).

Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind. This wisdom is a supernatural gift from God. It is not innate, as it is implicitly in 1 Kings 2:6-9; and it is not acquired by patient hard work, utilising careful observation and self-discipline, as it is explicitly in much of Proverbs and in 1 Kings 4:29-34. In the possession of such

wisdom Solomon was unparalleled in Israelite history, for no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you, as Hezekiah was unparalleled in trust (2 Kings 18:5), and Josiah in obedience to the Law of Moses (2 Kings 23:25).

Paul honoured God saying: <<*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine*>> (Ephesians 3:20). Solomon experienced God's ability to do far beyond all that anyone can ask for or think of. Solomon wisely asked God regarding his character, not his possessions. What Christians are is far more important than what they have.

¹⁵ Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem, where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. He offered up burnt-offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

1 Kings 3:15

Then Solomon awoke. It was a dream, but it was at the same time also a message from God, leaving Solomon with the same thoughts as Jacob had: <<*Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!'*>> (Genesis 28:16). God answered Solomon's prayer and made him wise, powerful, rich, and influential. His reign was glorious for Israel. At the same time, his end was tragic. It can fairly be said that Solomon wasted these gifts God gave him. Although he accomplished much, he could have done so much more - and his heart was led away from God in the end.

He offered up burnt-offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants. His servants here are likely to be the officials who served in his administration rather than the lower house servants: <<*In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were present*>> (Esther 1:2-3), and: <<*King Belshazzar made a great festival for a thousand of his lords, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand*>> (Daniel 5:1). However, it does indicate a principle that all people should be allowed to celebrate such occasions.

I.b.ii 1 Kings 3:16-28 - Solomon's Wisdom in Judgement

Two women come before Solomon each stating that a baby belongs to them. When Solomon determines that the child should be shared by being cut into two, the true mother is horrified and says the baby should be given to the false claimant. Thus Solomon knows who the true mother is and gives the child to her.

¹⁶ Later, two women who were prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. ¹⁷ One woman said, ‘Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. ¹⁸ Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. ¹⁹ Then this woman’s son died in the night, because she lay on him. ²⁰ She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. ²¹ When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne.’ ²² But the other woman said, ‘No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours.’ The first said, ‘No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine.’ So they argued before the king.

1 Kings 3:16-22

Two women who were prostitutes. Prostitutes appear in Proverbs Chapters 1-9 as one category of women that men would do well to avoid. Men should set their hearts instead on a relationship with Lady Wisdom, who will help them see through seductive and misleading words, e.g. Proverbs 6:20-29. Solomon, the possessor of wisdom, likewise has no difficulty seeing through the words spoken by the two women here. This in itself is a remarkable testimony to the goodness and generosity of Solomon. Not many kings would even take the time to settle a dispute between two prostitutes.

They stood before him because, in the absence of a second witness to corroborate their testimony as required by Deuteronomy 19:15, the normal legal procedures could not be followed, also see below. The Israelite king represented the highest court of appeal and was the foundation of all administration and justice (v.28).

No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours. This seemed like an impossible problem to solve. It was surely one woman’s word against the other, and there was no independent witness to the events, i.e. no one else with us in the house.

²³ Then the king said, ‘One says, “This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead”; while the other says, “Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one.”’ ²⁴ So the king said, ‘Bring me a sword’, and they brought a sword before the king. ²⁵ The king said, ‘Divide the living boy in two; then give half to one, and half to the other.’ ²⁶ But the woman whose son was alive said to the king – because compassion for her son burned within her – ‘Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly

do not kill him!’ The other said, ‘It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.’²⁷ Then the king responded: ‘Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother.’

1 Kings 3:23-27

Bring me a sword. Solomon’s old ‘wisdom’ had led previously to the use of the sword, but only for arguably unjust executions. His new wisdom leads him in more constructive ways: the sword functions in the service not of the ruthless self but of the kingdom as a whole: <<*You are the most handsome of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you for ever. Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your glory and majesty. In your majesty ride on victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend the right; let your right hand teach you dread deeds*>> (Psalm 45:2-4). In the same way, the works and even the judgements of God often first seem strange, dangerous, or even foolish. Time shows them to be perfect wisdom.

Because compassion for her son burned within her. The true parental relationship was proved by love. The true mother would rather have the child live without her than to die with her. She put the child’s welfare above her own.

She is his mother. Solomon knew that the offer to cut the child in two would reveal the true mother, and he rewarded the mother’s love accordingly.

²⁸ All Israel heard of the judgement 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 execute justice.

1 Kings 3:28

All Israel heard of the judgement. Such a wise decision could not be hidden. The matter was soon known throughout the kingdom.

This legal case reveals that the Lord had granted Solomon’s prior request for wisdom; through Solomon’s understanding of human nature, the identity of the true mother is rightly ascertained, and Israel realises that the wisdom of God was in him. The people of Israel saw that Solomon had both the wisdom and the courage to do the right thing as a leader. This would have made them hesitant to disobey the law of the king.

Paul describes the source of all wisdom and knowledge: <<*For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*>> (Colossians 2:1-3).

The old Jewish rabbis loved to go beyond the Bible and spin legends about Solomon's wisdom. Ginzberg quotes one, telling of the time when a demon showed Solomon something he had never seen before - a Cainaanite, whom the demon brought up out of the ground, and Solomon immediately saw that he had two heads. When the Cainaanite wanted to return again, he could not go back to his dwelling place deep under the earth. So he married and had seven sons, one of whom also had two heads. When the two-headed father died, the two-headed son claimed a double share of the inheritance, but the other six brothers thought he should only get one. The Sanhedrin could not decide the case, so Solomon prayed for wisdom and finally poured hot water on one of the heads. When he did, both heads flinched and cried out, and from this Solomon deduced that they were one person not two and should only have one share of the inheritance.