A Case Study of Attentive Bible Reading: The Myth of Good King Solomon **[1]**

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In this article we are going to look at story of Solomon as an example of how subtle the Bible can be and how careful and holistically the Bible should be read in order to get the most meaning out of it, as intended by the authors.

I would be able to write an entire essay on Solomon, but am going to restrict myself to a high-level overview and picking out a few key details which may be missed on a casual reading of the story of Solomon.

Keep in mind when reading this article, the *primary purpose* is not to discuss the life of Solomon himself; rather, his story is used as a *case study* on how to interpret what we read in the Bible within a wider context than the immediate story itself.

The Background of Solomon

The story of Solomon is mainly found in two places in the Bible: 1 Kings 1–11 and 2 Chronicles 1–9. In 2 Samuel 12:24–25 we are told of his birth. Solomon was born of king David and Bathsheba; David had had Bathsheba's husband Uriah murdered in order to conceal his affair with Bathsheba and her subsequent pregnancy. As punishment for their adultery, this first child of theirs died in infancy. See 2 Samuel 12:1–25 and Psalm 51. After this, Solomon is conceived and born. Following his birth, we are told "The Lord loved him" (2 Samuel 24).

Solomon would inherit his father's kingdom, even though he was not David's eldest living son (1 Kings 1). God had made a covenant with David (2 Samuel 7), saying that David would never fail to have an heir on the throne of Israel (which was a messianic prophecy); of whom Solomon would be the first heir. In contrast to his father David, Solomon's reign was relatively peaceful and the kingdom prospered. Solomon would undertake great building projects and gain the admiration of all of his neighbours (and beyond).

Several of the books in the Bible are attributed to Solomon himself. This includes *Ecclesiastes*, *Song of Songs*, and parts of *Proverbs* and *Psalms*. The former two books are not explicitly stated to be written by Solomon, but tradition attributes them to him. In this article we are not going to look at

these books.

For the purpose of this article, we'll primarily be focusing on the account of Solomon in 1 Kings, as opposed to the account in 2 Chronicles. The reason for this is that the two stories are similar, but 1 Kings adds details not found in 2 Chronicles, while 2 Chronicles does not add much to 1 Kings, and is less critical of Solomon.

The False Solomon

I am willing to wager that when most people think of Solomon, they think of what I call the "Sunday school" version of Solomon: good, wise king Solomon who was peaceful, wise and respected. This version may include Solomon's fall, where he ends up worshipping idols, from where we get a moralising lesson of men having to be careful of women leading them astray. But, in the end, Solomon is a good guy and one of the heroes of the Bible[1].

However, Solomon's character and story is complex, as we shall see, and nowhere near as clinical as we may think.

A Rocky Start

Right off the start, after David's passing, we see that Solomon's reign actually begins bloodily. In 1 Kings 2, Solomon consolidates his position as king by having a number of people executed, such as Joab, David's nephew and the commander of his army[2]. Consolidating power in this manner was not uncommon in the ancient world, but already this jars the image of "good king Solomon".

Solomon's Wisdom and Ignorance

After this (and marrying the Pharaoh's daughter in 1 Kings 3:1 to establish an alliance with Egypt, who of course were Israel's former slave masters), God visits Solomon in a dream and offers him whatever he may ask. Solomon does make a good request here, and asks for wisdom, instead of wealth or victory over his enemies. This pleases God, and He grants Solomon wisdom in addition to the things which he did not ask. Much of the rest of the story of Solomon goes on to describe the greatness that came from this (1 Kings 3:16–28 and 1 Kings 4:20–34) and his wisdom (1 Kings 10).

However, the writer of the book of Kings also includes a number of subtle, easily missable accounts of Solomon's ignorace[3]. For example:

- Even though Solomon (initially) "loved the Lord" (1 Kings 3:3), he engaged in improper worship of God (1 Kings 3:2–4; cf. Deuteronomy 12:2–4), doing it in a way which was syncretistic with the indigenous pagan religions.
- 1 Kings 4:26 says that Solomon gathered a large number of horses and chariots. On the surface this may appear to be merely another manifestation of his wealth and prosperity. However, in Deuteronomy 17:16, Israel's king is actually forbidden from gathering horses and chariots, *especially* from Egypt[4].
- Solomon fulfils his father's ambition of building God a grand temple (1 Kings 5–8). However, the author then notes that he built himself a palace (1 Kings 7:1–12) and, although he does not explicitly points out that this palace is larger than the Temple, this can be deduced from looking at the measurements. This palace is "costly"; a detail to which we'll return later.
- Solomon gives his close ally, Hiram of Tyre, a poor gift for all his contributions to Solomon's building projects (1 Kings 9:10–14), even though Solomon received good gifts from him (1 Kings 10:14, 16–17).
- In 1 Kings 10:26–29, it appears as if Solomon is engaged in arms trading, acquiring military technology from Egypt and selling it to his neighbours (who would eventually turn hostile towards Israel).
- Solomon uses forced labour (although not Israelite forced labour; 1 Kings 9:17–23) for his building projects.

- Solomon eventually (famously) amassed 700 wives and 300 concubines. But in Deuteronomy 17:17, the king of Israel was forbidden to have many wives.

All of these points betray another shortcoming: the king was required to write out a copy of the Law himself (to aid memorisation) and read it "all the days of his life" (Deuteronomy 17:18–20). Either Solomon did not do this (we are never told whether or not he did), or he blatantly disregarded what the Law said and followed his own heart's desires.

After Solomon's death, the kingdom of Israel is split into two over Solomon's unfaithfulness to God. The inciting event is when the people of Israel go to Solomon's successor, Rehoboam, and asked him to lighten their burden, because under Solomon "the people laboured hard" (1 Kings 12:4, 14). Recall that the Israelites were not used for forced labour, so it could be that they still had to work hard in order to pay high taxes to fund Solomon's many building projects and trade expeditions. Whatever the case, Rehoboam spurns the council of the old advisers and rather listens to the advice of his young friends, and refuses to show mercy on the people. (This seems to indicate that Solomon's wisdom did not transfer to his son, and also that Solomon likely did not show the necessary care to prepare his son to take over the throne of the kingdom.) There is a revolt, and the kingdom is split into two.

A careful reading of the story of Solomon also reveals something else which is interesting. God never asked for the Temple to be built (this was David's desire; see 1 Kings 8:15–19). It is not stated that God was displeased with Solomon for building a palace larger than the Temple; indeed, as the Temple cannot actually house God (1 Kings 8:27), this may have happened simply for practical reasons. It thus appears as if God is not too bothered by these earthly things (1 Kings 8:15–16). However, God repeatedly visits Solomon and warns him to remain *faithful* (1 Kings 3:14, 6:11–13, 9:3–9). It does appear as if, while the story of Solomon focusses on earthly prosperity, God is seeking spiritual obedience.

Solomon's Fall

Solomon eventually becomes ensnared by his many wives and is led to reject the God of Israel, and follow after pagan gods (1 Kings 11:1–8; cf. Exodus 34:10–17). This is the one thing which God repeatedly warned Solomon against. God goes on to pronounce judgement on Solomon, and enemies rise up against Solomon (1 Kings 11:14–40).

When Solomon dies, no mention is made that he ever repented from his idolatry (1 Kings 11:43). If he did not repent, he certainly cannot be viewed as a "hero" of the Bible[5].

Lessons from Solomon's Life

The story of Solomon's life seems to carry two major warnings for the reader:

1. God is less concerned about the great things we try and *do* on earth, whether we try to seek His glory or our own. Instead, He wants us to follow and obey Him; not how we think appropriate or according to our ambition, but in the way which God commanded.
2. Solomon failed *despite* having great wisdom, physical means and (an initial) mutual love between God and himself. Wisdom, therefore, does not necessarily lead to greater faith. This is a stark warning to learned and intellectual Christians. But the good news is that wisdom and prosperity are not prerequisites for salvation: faith and obedience (regardless of the circumstances) are (Matthew 6:25–33), and these are available to all people.

Conclusion

In this article I took a critical look at the life of Solomon. This was done to contrast the biblical account of Solomon against the whitewashed image of "good king Solomon" which is popular amongst many Christians. Of course, king Solomon did do good and praiseworthy things, such as his

building of the Temple, his writings, etc. However, the purpose of this article was to demonstrate how the story of the Solomon should be understood in the light of what was written previously in the Bible; in particular, a good knowledge of the book of Deuteronomy is required. Without this, we miss the subtle clues included by the writer of Kings, and can easily (and mistakenly) arrive at the idea of "good king Solomon".

While the story of Solomon is a good case study, it is not the only one in the Bible. The point is that, to get the most out of the Bible, a good working knowledge of the rest of the Bible is required when approaching any individual piece. This means that, upon the first reading, one likely will miss many details. But as one reads and rereads the Bible, one will pick up many more such details, and gain a new appreciation for the depth and complexity with which the authors of the Bible crafted their writings.

- 1. There are, in fact, no pure "heroes" in the Bible, apart from Jesus. All the other characters are presented as being very human and, as such, deeply flawed. Along with the list of righteous men in Hebrews 11, we can draw a parallel column and list their failings, such as David's adultery, Abraham's deceitfulness, Noah's drunkenness, etc.
- 2. This happened at David's recommendation, as he was unable to do anything against Joab and his rouge actions due to political reasons.
- 3. The question arises whether the author of Kings really intended the things which he wrote as "negative" against Solomon or a "warning" to the reader. I believe they were intentional. Writings in the Bible (and in other ancient literature) often were terse, because writing was expensive and laborious to do. So when a detail is included, one needs to ask, "why is this detail mentioned here?" Also, given the strong emphasis of the writer on God and proper worship of Him in the book, it is reasonable to assume that he would have assumed a deep familiarity with the Jewish law, and the concern that it be followed properly.
- 4. Note what God says about Egypt in this verse: Israel is not to develop a dependence on Egypt again. Yet Solomon married the Pharaoh's daughter to establish an alliance between the two kingdoms. What is more, in 2 Chronicles 8:11, Solomon moves Pharaoh's daughter out of the city of David, because it is "holy". This *may* imply that she did not convert to Judaism, and therefore still worshipped pagan gods, but it could also be just because she was a foreigner. Still, Solomon being married to the daughter of Pharaoh turns out to be a problem.
- 5. Many Christians insist that Solomon repented and turned back to God before his death, but there is no evidence in the Bible for this.

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