

King of the World: Solomon

Montecito Covenant Church

Telford Work, Westmont College

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Reading: 1 Kings 10:23-25 and 11:1-4.

Good Times, Bad Times

Diana called last summer and invited me to come and preach on how the biblical character of my choice put his or her gifts to use. Almost immediately, I thought of King Solomon.

This is not because you all are building a new building! In Christ, *we* are the building and Christ the cornerstone. I have suffered through one too many dedications of a new building where Solomon's prayer was invoked. (To be precise, *one*, which is one too many.) So put *that* parallel out of your heads right now.

I did not choose Solomon because I have studied him extensively; in fact, I have hardly studied him at all. I chose him because his era, like ours, is a time of unparalleled power and wealth. The rivals that usually threatened Israel are incapacitated. This little window of opportunity gives Israel a moment of greatness. Likewise, America has never been richer or stronger economically, militarily, culturally. It has plenty of adversaries, but no serious rivals. Whether or not you or I are individually wealthy and powerful, our society *is*. That makes us *socially* powerful, and marks our lives with at least the wealth and power of others. Like Israel, all but the poorest of us share in the good times: "Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sands of the sea; they ate and drank and were content" (1 Kings 4:20).

That makes me think we have something to learn from Solomon and his times.

Solomon gets a lot of press in Scripture: A long sequence of chapters in 1 Kings (1-11), another in 2 Chronicles (1-9), a psalm (72), and a whole tradition of wisdom literature (Proverbs,

Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Solomon) all spring from the life of this son of David and Bathsheba.

I think one of the things that makes Solomon so fascinating is his ambiguity. The narrative really tells *two* stories. In one, Solomon ascends to towering, dizzying, commanding heights of success. In the other, unaddressed and worsening problems spiral down into abject, tragic failure. The genius of the narrative is that it *almost* keeps each story independent of the other. It seems as if Solomon and Israel are leading double lives. Only as it all unravels do we figure out that everything is tied together.

Optimists will want to focus on the happy stuff, pessimists on the unhappy stuff. It is natural to want to use one of these to frame the other. Yet 1 Kings doesn't let us either remain naïve about Solomon, nor become cynical about him. The narrator does something a lesser storyteller would not: he holds back from letting one side swamp the other. He refuses to render a clear thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Even the bloody beginning and unhappy ending of Solomon's reign cannot erase the glamour of the middle.

Where angels fear to tread, fools rush in. One "conservative" commentary falls for the razzle-dazzle of gold, cedar, and bronze. A "liberal" one cannot see past the forced labor and crushing taxes that build it all. I think we should dwell in Solomon's ambiguity. We should both revel in his splendor and revolt against his smarminess. After all, God does!

Over the Top

First, Solomon's splendor. The key to this is his extremism. The man just doesn't do things halfway. Everything he does is over the top. Even education! "Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the Kedemites and than all the wisdom of the Egyptians. ... His fame spread among all the surrounding nations. He composed three thousand proverbs, and his

songs numbered one thousand and five. He discoursed about trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; and he discoursed about beasts, birds, creeping things, and fishes. Men of all peoples came to hear Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the earth who had heard of wisdom" (1 Kings 5:9-14). Then there is the money, the power, the international prestige, the ruthlessness toward opponents, his harem of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines ... Robin Leach should be reading these lines on an episode of "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." The man is a machine.

And he worships the same way. Solomon doesn't scrimp on God's temple. "Solomon made all the furnishings that were in the House of YHWH: the altar, of gold; the table for the bread of display, of gold; the lampstands – five on the right side and five on the left – of solid gold; and the petals, lamps, and tongs, of gold; the basins, snuffers, sprinkling bowls, ladles, and fire pans, of solid gold; and the hinge sockets for the doors of the innermost part of the House, the Holy of Holies, and for the doors of the Great Hall of the House, of gold" (1 Kings 7:48-50). The hinge sockets!

Solomon makes worship a *hardship*, a *sacrifice*, a *risk*. It consumes his budget. It strains his alliances. It tests the commitments of his kingdom. In fact, after his death the burden turns out to have been too great for his subjects to bear (1 Kings 12).

Sure, Solomon has issues. But let the one here today who is without sin cast the first stone. *I* don't worship like this. *I* don't jeopardize my kids' future prospects by the way *I* give. *I* am so *under the top* that it's not even funny. *I* even hold myself back when just *I* want to raise my arms in worship or cross myself, because of what others might think. Is my worship risky like Solomon's is? Not even. *I* am not worthy.

This is getting uncomfortable. Time to change the subject! Time to be revolted!

What Went Wrong

Solomon was arguably the most gifted human being between Abraham and Mary. (You can substitute Peter if you prefer the Holy Spirit to the Son.) Solomon had a pedigree, a kingdom, an empire, a fortune, divine wisdom, elite schooling, an unparalleled reputation, an heir to his throne, and – most importantly – God’s favor. What went wrong?

It’s not the extravagance that is wrong. Solomon is *right* to spare no expense. However, Solomon spares no expense building a house that looks a lot like his own palace. In the middle of describing in excruciating detail the opulent construction of the temple, the story slyly interrupts itself to chronicle another big public works project:

It took [Solomon] seven years to build [the temple]. And it took Solomon *thirteen* years to build his palace, until his whole palace was completed.

He built the Lebanon Forest House with four rows of cedar columns, and with hewn cedar beams above the columns. Its length was 100 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits. It was paneled above with cedar, with the planks that were above on the 45 columns – 15 in each row. And there were three rows of window frames, with three tiers of windows facing each other. . . .

He made the portico of columns 50 cubits long and 30 cubits wide; the portico was in front, and there were columns with a canopy in front of them. He made the throne portico, where he was to pronounce judgment – the Hall of Judgment. It was paneled with cedar from floor to floor. [I know this gets tedious. It is supposed to.]

The house that he used as a residence, in the rear courtyard, back of the portico, was of the same construction. Solomon also constructed a palace like that portico *for the daughter of Pharaoh, whom he had married*.

All these buildings, from foundation to coping and all the way out to the great courtyard, were of *costly* stones, hewn according to measure, smooth on all sides. The foundations were huge blocks of *costly* stone, stones of 10 cubits and stones of 8 cubits; and above were *costly* stones, hewn according to measure, and cedar wood. The large surrounding courtyard had three tiers of hewn stone and a row of cedar beams, *the same as for the inner court of the House of YHWH, and for the portico of the house*” (1 Kings 6:1-12).

It turns out that a lot of the construction up there isn’t for YHWH. It is for Solomon.

(And this material isn’t just tedious because there is a lot of it. It is boring because hearing about other people’s wealth is always boring.)

We are shown this so we'll notice that the temple *fit right in* with its surroundings. Everything matches! The temple's architecture, like the king's family and politics, draws on Canaanite and Egyptian influences. Its lavish materials are the imported symbols of worldly glory. It is at the center of Solomon's administration. It proclaims that creator God is the guarantor of the security of this realm. Yet this is a realm that has less and less to do every year with what it used to mean to be the people of God.

Oh, he nods to the old ways. On moving day, Solomon implores YHWH, whom nowhere in heaven or on earth can contain, that his "name might abide there" (1 Kings 8:27-30). He begs his people to act nice and keep the commandments "which he enjoined upon our fathers" (8:58). (Not "our fathers and us"? Hmmm!) He prays that the world would see the spectacle of Israel's prosperity and "know that YHWH alone is God, there is no other" (8:60). He sacrifices 144,000 animals as part of the ceremony. It is all very orthodox, very traditional, very evangelistic – very worshipful. Extremely. Extravagantly.

God graciously accepts the invitation (9:1-9). Everyone goes home, happy that things are going so well for their society (8:66). Yet I can't help but imagine that on that first night, YHWH must have felt out of place in his new digs. Had he become an official of his administration? Was he now another of Solomon's wives?

What strikes me about Solomon's acts of worship and leadership is not that they are trivial or superficial or hypocritical – the text does not indicate that at all – but that they are giving YHWH a makeover he doesn't want.

Where Not to Live

Solomon's expression of love brings me back to opulent America. This is God as Cinderella, and Solomon as fairy godmother. (It is not Rex Harrison transforming Audrey

Hepburn in “My Fair Lady” just to prove that he can. It is not “Pretty Woman” or “Educating Rita.” It is certainly a narcissist undergoing elective surgery in “Extreme Makeover” because she doesn’t like her cheekbones!) This is – here is where my credibility goes down the tubes – one of my new favorite reality TV shows, [“What Not to Wear.”](#)

The show is a British import whose American version is on The Learning Channel. In every episode, a family nominates a loved one. He or she goes to New York, the old wardrobe goes in a trashcan after about forty minutes of totally catty criticism by the two fashion hosts, and a new \$5,000 wardrobe and makeover transform not only the person’s appearance, but the person’s whole life. The episode I caught [turned Amanda Jane Stallins into a fashion diva.](#)

I know that as a professor I am supposed to hate these shows, but the episode I saw really did give me a warm feeling. I am happy for Amanda. At the end of the show, she has not only a new aesthetic, but a new outlook on life, a new confidence. Her family wipes away the tears as they see the transformation for the first time. The scene looks a little like prom night, or (to bring it uncomfortably close to home) graduation day at Westmont.

This is right where we are as a culture! It’s about making everyone free and rich and beautiful. Not because we hate our neighbors, but because we love them as ourselves!

Likewise, Solomon loves YHWH; he really does. He just doesn’t think YHWH has very good taste. YHWH submits to this glorious humiliation with such weary patience that it begins to hit us how heartbreaking it all must have been – to watch Solomon’s love of YHWH being absorbed into his love of self.

How heartbreaking it must be now, for God to look at Americans who, when we do not turn our backs on God, shower him with extravagances to make him relevant.

What went wrong is this: Solomon, like all Israel, put God “almost first.” That is an

impressive thing. Seriously! Yet it fails, it has to fail, because “almost first” means second. The worshippers come to be dazzled by their sacrifice rather than the *object* of their sacrifice.

Ultimately they come to worship other gods, especially themselves.

God doesn't want to *look like us*; God doesn't want to *live like us*. God wants *us* to get the makeover. The real power of God, the real wisdom of God, does not live in a palace. It dies on a cross.

Greater than Solomon

Speaking of which: For such an influential figure in Israel's memory, Solomon is barely mentioned in the New Testament. Perhaps this is because his story mainly *contrasts* with Jesus':

Solomon is the greatest (1 Kings 10:23); Jesus is “one greater than Solomon.”

Solomon receives wisdom from God; Christ is the wisdom of God.

Solomon is splendid; the least of the Kingdom of God is more splendid.

Solomon's temple came by the hands of slaves; Christ's is not made with hands.

Solomon married the world; Christ marries the Church.

Solomon is king of the world; Christ is king of all kings.

Solomon puts God “almost first”; Christ puts God first.

Ouch!

Yet for all this, a different contrast is coming to my mind. Solomon's extravagance reminds me of another story of extravagance. Can you guess what it is?

While [Jesus] was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very *costly*, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. But there were some who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment thus wasted? For this ointment might have been sold for [a year's wages], and given to the poor.” And they reproached her. But Jesus said, “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (Mark 14:3-9).

Like an expensive Cecil B. DeMille movie set, the temple was money well spent. It is gone, but its images are eternal. We are still talking about what it reveals not only about the faith of its financier, but also about his character. So it is with the owner of that jar. We don't know her name, but we know her story.

YHWH goes along with Solomon's extravagance, but Jesus *approves* of the woman's. I think this is because it points *sacrificially* toward *his* sacrifice, his *self*-sacrifice. This isn't a makeover; it is an embalming.

How should *we* worship God in a time of wealth, wisdom, and power? I think the answer lies here. Stinginess will not do. Yet our extravagances are not for conforming God to this world. They are for conforming the world to God. They are for buying the only treasure that really counts. God does not envy our relevance, or our taste, or our refinement, or our cosmopolitanism, or our influence. (In Santa Barbara, that hurts.) God calls us *to invest extravagantly in holiness*.

All I can say is that such an investment doesn't just open a Bible, a Day-Timer, or even a checkbook; it bears a cross. It submits all that we are and have to another whole way of worshipping. It doesn't just sacrifice; it *is* sacrifice. Sure, it involves our power, our wealth, and our taste. The woman at Bethany has all of them! But extravagant cross-bearing makes us over inside as well as outside, clothes us with a whole new wardrobe of righteousness, and relocates us in a mansion not of our own making.

Perhaps this should not have been a talk on Solomon. Perhaps I should have focused on the woman at Bethany. She is who Solomon could have become, had he not turned into a parody of himself. She is who we can become. But Solomon, I think, is more who we are as a people. And God still loves him as a son, sticks by him, receives his praise, hears his prayers, and lets

him break his heart. God disciplines him, but never withdraws his favor (2 Sam. 7:11-15). That news may not always be pleasant for us, but it is always good.

God even gives Solomon a son, a Son who is here with us today in Spirit and in truth.

Let's pray. [Psalm 72.]