

The Way of Wisdom?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

July 28, 2013

1st in a six-part series drawn from the book of Kings

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1 Kings 8:14–21 (NIV)

¹⁴While the whole assembly of Israel was standing there, the king turned around and blessed them. ¹⁵Then he said:

“Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who with his own hand has fulfilled what he promised with his own mouth to my father David. For he said, ¹⁶‘Since the day I brought my people Israel out of Egypt, I have not chosen a city in any tribe of Israel to have a temple built so that my Name might be there, but I have chosen David to rule my people Israel.’

¹⁷‘My father David had it in his heart to build a temple for the Name of the LORD, the God of Israel. ¹⁸But the LORD said to my father David, ‘You did well to have it in your heart to build a temple for my Name. ¹⁹Nevertheless, you are not the one to build the temple, but your son, your own flesh and blood—he is the one who will build the temple for my Name.’

²⁰‘The LORD has kept the promise he made: I have succeeded David my father and now I sit on the throne of Israel, just as the LORD promised, and I have built the temple for the Name of the LORD, the God of Israel. ²¹I have provided a place there for the ark, in which is the covenant of the LORD that he made with our ancestors when he brought them out of Egypt.’”

1 Kings 11:1–6 (NIV)

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. ²They were from nations about which the LORD 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. ³He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. ⁴As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. ⁵He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. ⁶So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done.

You’d think that if God himself granted you wisdom, you’d do just the right thing in every circumstance. However, in the story of Solomon as in our own lives, things are never quite so simple.

We Americans don’t have much experience with kings. As schoolchildren we learned that George Washington made sure the people through their representatives would govern the new nation formed from thirteen British colonies; they would be citizens, not subjects. Some Western democracies still have kings and queens, though they don’t rule in any meaningful sense. On our recent trip to Canada, we visited several large churches that reserved a pew for the British sovereign. (Sadly, none of these churches ever need the space . . . not even close).

In stark contrast, most of the ancient world was dominated by all powerful monarchs of one sort or another. Many were seen as demi-gods who ruled with the authority of one god or another.

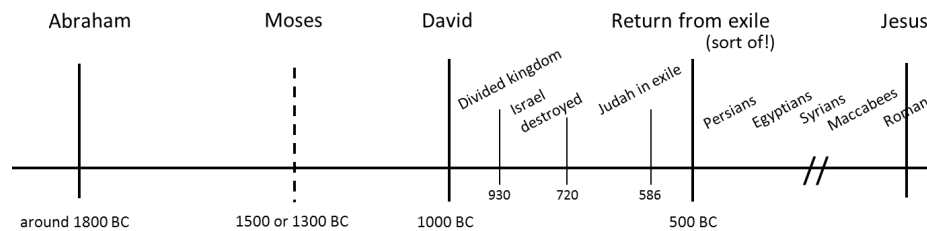
The annals of the Israelites told the story of their own experience with kings. After Moses’ death, Joshua led the Israelites in a war of conquest, occupying much of the land of Canaan. Over a period of a couple of hundred years, the Israelites consolidated their

conquests and settled large portions of the Promised Land.¹ During this period, the Israelites were governed by judges; people such as Deborah, Samson, and Samuel who guided Israel under God’s kingship. But the book of Judges paints a rather bleak picture of the inability of God’s people to live under God’s Law. As the last verse of the Book of Judges puts it, everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes.

God had given his people judges because he did not want Israel to have an earthly king. God himself was to be their king. However, the people descended ever deeper into lawlessness and, in time, the people came to demand a king like everyone else had. After numerous warnings from the prophet Samuel, God acceded to the people’s wishes and anointed Saul as the first king of the twelve tribes. Saul failed as king; he disobeyed God, imagining he knew better.

David, who was the second king of the united tribes and became the idealized king of God’s people, succeeded Saul. God even made David the promise that a descendent from his own family would always sit on the throne of Israel. King David died an old man and was succeeded by his son, Solomon – who was the third and the last king of the united Israel, but that story is for next week.

An Old Testament Timeline



Solomon the Wise?

If the average person knows anything about King Solomon it is that he was wise. Indeed, in a dream, God told Solomon to ask for whatever he wanted. When Solomon asked for “a discerning heart” so that he might be a good ruler, able to distinguish right from wrong, God granted that to him:

“I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.” (1 Kings 3:12-14)

Solomon soon displayed his wisdom when two women arguing over the possession of an infant came before him. Solomon ordered the baby split in two, thereby revealing the true mother to be the woman who would rather give up the child than see it killed.

In addition to exercising his wisdom, Solomon took Israel to its height of power – militarily, politically, and economically. The king amassed great wealth and used it to build a proper temple to God. By combining his wealth with that of the people, Solomon guided the construction of a temple that would stand in Jerusalem for four centuries.

Solomon was the very picture of unlimited potential, yet too soon we begin to see that his heart was not really with God. He builds a magnificent temple to the Lord God; yet he builds a palace for himself that is four times larger (compare 1 Kings 6:2 and 7:2).

¹ If you have a study Bible, the maps in the back will probably help you see what is going on in Israel’s history.

And he takes to himself seven hundred wives of royal birth (foreign) and three hundred concubines (presumably Israelite) and, as God had warned, the foreign wives begin to turn Solomon's heart to foreign gods – to idols. He worshipped these idols and built altars to them. He offered up incense and sacrifices . . . and the LORD God grew angry. The seeds of Israel's destruction were sown.

The problem with idols

Biblical passages about idols and God's warning about them can be pretty hard for us to connect with. None of us knowingly worship other gods nor are our homes filled with little figurines to deities, unless they are "just art." So we have to put some effort into understanding this business of idols and the risks they pose to us even now.

When seeking some fresh insight or new direction, the writings of Eugene Peterson is always a good place to turn. Here is a bit of what he had to say about idols in his book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: a conversation in spiritual theology*:

- Idolatry is "reducing God to a concept or object that we can use for our benefit."
- "Idolatry is using God, not worshiping God."
- "An idol is god with all the God taken out. God depersonalized, God derelationalized, a god that we can use and enlist and fantasize without ever once having to (maybe 'getting to' is the better phrase) receive or give love, and then to go on to live, however falteringly, at our most human. The essence of idolatry is depersonalization. The idol is a form of divinity that requires no personal relationship. The idol is a form of divinity that I can manipulate or control. The idol reverses the God/creature relationship: now I am the god and the idol is the creature."

We may never have thought of idolatry in that way, but that is definitely the biblical view. Idolatry is not about the priorities in my life, but how I think about God and how I relate to God.

Consider the Ten Commandments and idols: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I the LORD your God am jealous God . . ." (Exodus 20:4-5a)

Such idols were usually crafted figurines of various sizes and materials who represented gods of varying functions. Some brought fertility, some rain, others harvests, and so on. Ancient people devised rituals to call upon these gods to deliver what the people needed and desired. Since we humans have a wide assortment of needs and wants there were numerous such gods and their material representations, the idols.

This isn't too far removed from some advice I was once given on how to sell a house fast: (1) buy a figurine of a certain Roman Catholic saint, (2) bury it in the front flower bed, face up with the feet pointing to the street (or was it the other way around?), and (3) stand back and watch the offers roll in.

You're probably thinking to yourself, how silly. Surely we don't reduce God to some sort of good luck charm or real estate agent. Or do we? How often do we reduce God to an instrument that we use to get what we want? Remember one of the tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism²: *God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.* Sounds pretty much like an idol to me.

² See the May 12, 2013 Weekly Bible Study on "Pop Christianity." It can be downloaded at www.scottengle.org.

More on King Solomon – taken from *The New Bible Dictionary* (IVP)

The Rise to Power

Solomon's path to the throne was far from smooth. Absalom's opposition was carried on by David's oldest surviving son, Adonijah (2 Sa. 3:4), who made a strong bid for the throne during his father's last days (1 Ki. 1:5ff.). Supported by David's deposed general, Joab, who had slain Absalom (2 Sa. 18:14–15), and the influential priest, Abiathar, Adonijah rallied support and actually held a coronation feast at En-rogel. But Solomon was not without allies. Benaiah, the son of Jehoiada, had his eye on the generalship; Zadok coveted a prominent priestly position. Their spokesman was Nathan the prophet, a confidant of David and Bathsheba (1 Ki. 1:11ff.). After Nathan and Bathsheba reminded David of his unexecuted promise concerning Solomon, the king gave instructions for Solomon's accession and sealed them with an oath (1 Ki. 1:28ff.).

The news of Solomon's coronation, for which David's storied bodyguard of Cherethites and Pelethites offered protection, broke up Adonijah's festivities (1 Ki. 1:41ff.) but not his stratagems to control the kingdom. He implored Bathsheba to influence Solomon to give him Abishag, David's handmaiden (1 Ki. 1:3–4), as wife (1 Ki. 2:13ff.). Solomon, apparently fearing that such a marriage would give Adonijah leverage with which to prise him from the throne, refused. Adonijah paid with his life for his rash proposal (1 Ki. 2:25); when Abiathar the priest was banished from office (1 Ki. 2:26–27) and Joab vengefully slain before the altar (1 Ki. 2:28ff.), Solomon reigned without a rival. The prominent role of the queen-mother in this whole intrigue is noteworthy. Bathsheba seems to have blazed the trail for other queen-mothers in Judah, for the author of Kings faithfully records the name of each king's mother (e.g. 1 Ki. 15:2, 10). The arbitrary manner in which Solomon was chosen boded ill for the future. The elders of Judah and Israel, on whose goodwill true national harmony depended, were bypassed in the decision.

The Iron Ruler

Solomon's task was to maintain and control the expanse of territory bequeathed him by David. Further, he had to effect as smooth a transition as possible from the tribal confederacy which had characterized pre-Davidic political life to the strong central government which alone could maintain Israel's empire.

The traditional tribal boundaries were replaced by administrative districts: twelve in Israel (1 Ki. 4:7ff.) and perhaps one in Judah; cf. the problematic 4:19 in *rsv*. Each of these tax districts was obligated to provide support for the court for a month during the year (1 Ki. 4:7), which would appear an onerous task according to the list in 1 Ki. 4:22–23.

In addition to this, Solomon began recruiting labourers from among the Israelites, a measure unpalatable to a people who relished freedom. . . . The unpopularity of Solomon's policy is evidenced in the assassination of Adoniram, the superintendent of the labour crews (1 Ki. 4:6; 5:14; 12:18) and in the request for redress of grievances, the denial of which by Rehoboam led to the secession of the N kingdom (1 Ki. 12:4ff.).

Resentment was also engendered, in all probability, by Solomon's pledging of twenty Galilean cities to Hiram in return for financial aid (1 Ki. 9:10ff.). The fact that Hiram may have returned these later (as 2 Ch. 8:1–2 seems to hint) would not have completely relieved the resentment. Solomon had accomplished monumental tasks, including the building of the temple, but at an exorbitant price: the goodwill and loyalty of his people.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What did you know of Solomon before reading this study? Did you know him as wise? Powerful? Rich? What surprises you most in the Bible's depiction of Solomon? If he prayed for a "discerning heart" and it was granted to him, then why do you think he could go far astray? He plants the seeds of Israel's ruin at the height of the nation's worldly power.
2. How could the worship of some figures or even some non-existent gods make such a big difference in the course of Israel's story? Do you think we moderns take such a story very seriously? How important is it, truly, that our devotion and worship be directed to the God-Who-Really-Is?
3. In what ways have you always thought of idols? Have you ever considered yourself an idolater, i.e., a worshiper of idols? I suggest that it has to be more than simply the ordering of my priorities and focus. Do you agree? If so, why? You might go back and re-read what Peterson has to say and put it in the context of the "house-selling saint." In what ways do you reduce God to a trusted and valuable assistant?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, 1 Kings 1 & 2 Solomon takes the throne.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Kings 3-4 Solomon's wisdom and the course of his reign</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Kings 5-6 Solomon's temple</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Kings 7-9:9 Solomon builds his palace and dedicates the temple.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Kings 9:10 – 10:29 Solomon's grandeur and the Queen of Sheba.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

