

“The Why of Wisdom”

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Fifth in a series on King Solomon

1st Kings 4.29-34; 10.1-10, 13

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Please read the Scripture by clicking here: [1st Kings 4.29-34; 10.1-13](#)

Solomon was king of God’s People for something like 40 years. He gets remembered for few things:

- He wisely governed through the “golden age” of Israel’s existence as a country.
- He wisely sponsored and led the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem. (We looked at that the past two Sundays.)
- He wisely judged legal cases. (We’ll look at it next week.)

Through it all, he was wise. That’s what he is best known for. God gave Solomon wisdom.

But, what is wisdom for? is wisdom enough?

Solomon also gets remembered for when the queen of Sheba came for a visit. She points us to those important questions: What is wisdom for? Solomon’s wisdom? Our wisdom? Is wisdom enough?

In the account, we hear about what Solomon taught her. She had something to teach him too. If he would listen.

II

We don’t know a lot about her, not even her name. But imaginations have run wild, usually about whether she and Solomon were “more than friends.” For instance, one of the books in the Bible is called the *Song of Songs*. It’s a series of poems by two lovers. Tradition says Solomon wrote it. People have guessed that the Queen of Sheba was the other lover. Another example. The ancient dynasty that ruled Ethiopia for more than 200 generations claimed that it was started by Solomon and Sheba’s child. There is no evidence for any of this, or that there was anything romantic or sexual between them. The sad truth, though, is that too many interpreters and artists (almost always male) have figured she was worth attention only if she had stirred Solomon’s libido.

Here’s the truth of it: the Queen was on a diplomatic trade mission.¹ Israel controlled important trade routes. Sheba had a lot of wealth to trade. Sheba was probably on the southern Arabian peninsula (modern-day Yemen), or maybe across the strait into Africa

¹ John Monson, “1 Kings” in John H. Walton, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 3* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 47.

(where Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia are now). These areas were wealthy with spices, wine, and grain. It needed to trade through Solomon's kingdom to get these to market. As Solomon and the Queen talked, it was not Cupid's arrows flying over their heads, but dollar signs.

Also, deep thoughts. All rulers were expected to be wise. Running a kingdom well takes smarts. Still, Solomon stood out as exceptionally clever.² His reputation grew throughout the Middle East.³ He became a bit of a tourist attraction for the high and mighty.⁴ Including Sheba's queen.

She "tested him with riddles," it says. No, they didn't sit around swapping dad jokes. It means she asked him hard questions. They discussed complex matters. She watched how he did things, his "best practices" for running a kingdom, even how he treated guests like her.⁵

She was impressed. Solomon was wise!

III

I mentioned one of Biblical writings tradition says Solomon wrote, the *Song of Songs*. As I said, it's a love poem, divided into different episodes. It celebrates sexual love and faithfulness. How to be in love. How to show love. That's wisdom.

Another wisdom book in the Bible is called *Ecclesiastes*. Again, tradition says Solomon wrote it. He probably did not, but it was his sort of wisdom that inspired it. It ponders what life is all about, and what the point of pursuing anything is when, no matter what we do, we die in the end. Life's meaning. That's wisdom.

Then there is the book of *Proverbs*. Proverbs are wise sayings collected together to guide future generations. Again, tradition says Solomon wrote it, and many of the proverbs might

² Goldingay writes, "There is no doubt that he would need to be an astute guy to administer and control this mini-empire. In the Middle East, the kind of wisdom that the story talks about (much of it the kind that is collected in Proverbs) was an indispensable adjunct to such political and economic leadership, and the people around had court colleges for training people involved in the administration. It would almost be necessary for Solomon's wisdom to exceed that of those other people if his wide rule was to be effective." *1 & 2 Kings for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 24.

³ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume 1: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 577.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann used the term "tourist attraction." Cited in David K. Naugle, "Solomon the Scholar" *Comment* (September 2009). <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/solomon-the-scholar/>

⁵ The Biblical account stresses that she was impressed by "the embodiment of wisdom in the order, abundance, and beauty of Solomon's state dinners." Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 78.

go back to him. Guidance for how to live. That's wisdom.

Wisdom is skill for life.

Wisdom is understanding how things work.

Wisdom is understanding how the natural world works. The reading told us about Solomon's natural knowledge. The idea is that when you understand how plants are, how animals are, how people are, and things like the ways of the stars, and the ways of the seas, and the ways of the weather, then you are getting at the underlying order of all things.

Wisdom is understanding how people work. It is knowing how to get along with others, how to have a good influence, when to speak and when to be silent.

IV

Let's come back to the Queen of Sheba. Solomon amazes her. He has far-exceeded everything she has heard about him. They've had this diplomatic summit together, and laid the groundwork for a strong and prosperous relationship between their two nations.

Then, she says this:

*Bless the Lord your God
because he was pleased
to place you on Israel's throne.
Because the Lord loved Israel with an eternal love,
the Lord made you king
to uphold justice and righteousness.⁶*

To uphold justice and righteousness.

The Queen of Sheba is not part of God's People. She is from another place, another people, another religious tradition that is, frankly, at odds with who God is. Still, she has seen enough during her time among Solomon and his people. She has heard enough of the covenant way of God. God seems to have been speaking through her. So she could say to Solomon and remind him that all of his wealth, all of his success, all of his power, this wonderful Temple he has built, his sparkling reputation, and above all his profound God-given wisdom . . . all is for one thing.

To uphold justice and righteousness. This is the job of God's People. To uphold justice and

⁶ 1st Kings 10:9 (CEB).

righteousness. This is the purpose of the nation. To uphold justice and righteousness. This is what being ruler of God's People is all about.

Righteousness is living faithfully in our covenant relationship with God.

Justice, in the biblical vision, is about sharing resources, power, and belonging among everyone in the community (including those who are poor, powerless, and marginalized).⁷

V

What is the 'Why' of wisdom? Why does God give us knowledge, skill, ability and understanding? So we can live with justice and righteousness.

Wisdom is like a rudder on a ship. It steers you so you can get where you are going.

Our day and age is better than Solomon. We know a lot more than Solomon ever could, and what we know increases every day. We understand how things work in ways Solomon could never have imagined. We have amazing abilities!

The problem is not wisdom. We have a great rudder. But where are we steering the ship? If you are heading in the wrong direction, the best rudder won't help you.

Wisdom is important. But it is not enough. Not if we are failing to live out the "why" of wisdom: justice and righteousness. Wisdom is no help if we are not living rightly in our relationship with God. Wisdom is no help if we are not living rightly in our relationships with each other in our society, our community, our church.

In fact, without right relations with God and one another, our great wisdom will steer us wrong.

We'll see how this works with Solomon. How is it with us?

May God give us wisdom.

And may God change our hearts, toward justice and righteousness. Amen.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, Theology of the Old Testament (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 611.