

“A Split Decision”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

Sixth in a series on King Solomon

1st Kings 3:16-28

June 23, 2019

Please read the Scripture by clicking here: [1st Kings 3:16-28](#)

I planned out this series on the reign of King Solomon. Then we needed to switch some things around. Then I realized we would be doing this story on Mothers' Day. That's a hard-enough day for many of us. So though this episode comes from the beginning of Solomon's kingship, we're listening to it today near the end of this series.

I called this sermon “A Split Decision.” I know. That's bad! Besides the virtue of being a terrible pun, nonetheless that title gets at how I feel about it.

“Split decision” is a term from courtrooms. When a verdict gets appealed, it goes to a higher court. There it is usually a group of judges. They hear the arguments, discuss them together, and come to an agreement on their verdict. Sometimes they don't all agree. The majority decides the verdict, but it's a split decision.

I am split about Solomon's decision. Yes, he was creative, insightful, and brilliant. His judgment was the right one. But was justice really done?

II

Let's review the case. Two parties are engaged in litigation. . . . No, let's be real.

Two babies. One dead. One alive.

Two women. Both new mothers. Both heartbroken. Both terrified. Both desperate. Both alone.

Both “prostitutes,” we're told. But we hear no judgment passed on that. It just explains things. They are used by many men, but under the shelter of none. (In that sort of patriarchal society, they are very vulnerable.) I expect they have been disowned. I imagine they are poor.

They are alone, except for each other. They've joined together to survive. They share what little they have. They watch each others back; the sex trade is dangerous. With them both expecting, you figure they have plans to watch over each other's child.

It is just the two of them, and their two babies. So no witnesses to what really happened that terrible night.

All we know is one baby is dead. One still lives. Both mothers are torn apart. Each insists the living child is hers.

They come to the king. That's remarkable. Even they can get a hearing. That is a mark of just society, where the courts are available to all. Our society has work to do.

What will this king do? All we have is one broken story against the other. We've heard what one says happened, but the other says different. Which do you believe? Whom do you dare disbelieve?

No one had heard of DNA. There is no test they can turn to. I know, every newborn is beautiful, but they put bands on them for a reason. They pretty much look the same. God knows who's from whom, but we're not God. How do we decide? It's a detective story, without the entertainment. It's terribly true. But what's the truth?

III

Brand-new king Solomon had asked God for wisdom, for "a discerning mind . . . to distinguish good from evil." Has God delivered? This is a test of Solomon. So he runs a test on them.

"Bring me a sword!"

You could already cut the tension. Now this! What's he going to do with a sword?

"Divide the child in two."

Has he lost his mind? This is "discerning good from evil?" More like plunging into the pit of devilry.

The court gasps. Both mothers cry. "*No! I give him up!*" cries one, while "*Yes! Cut him up!*" cries the other.¹

¹ Peter Leithart aptly describes the dynamics of the scene. "The sequence of 3:26 makes it appear that the mother speaks first and then the false mother. This would indeed be an alarming turn of events: the two women are disputing custody of the living child, and the real mother concedes her claim to her rival. And, *at the very moment she's won*, the false mother callously calls on Solomon to kill the child. For the sake of realism, we should understand the women's responses as simultaneous. But the sequence is intriguing and truly renders the false mother's envious motivations." On this last point of the "false" mother's motivations, however, Leithart's dismissal strikes me as unkind. She is not a "false" mother, but a mother who has been tragically bereaved. Her response is perhaps inexcusable, but it is explainable. Peter J. Leithart, 1 & 2 Kings (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 45 note 5.

Their cries are opposed. Yet both reveal broken hearts, and together they reveal the truth.

Solomon judges the case. *“Give her the living child”* he says, nodding to the one who has just said pretty much the same thing.² *“Give her the living child.”* Her surrender has gained her victory.

Solomon rightly understands human nature. His wisdom is celebrated.

Don't forget, though, that it's a mother's compassion that saves the day. The Hebrew word for compassion literally means “womb.” The mother's womb burns for her child, so she is willing to let him go. She will desperately sacrifice so he can live.³ She is the hero of the story. Thank God, Solomon is wise enough to see it.

IV

But has justice happened?

Justice happens when things that are wrong are set right. In this case . . . Yes! The living child and his true mother are restored together. This is important! Solomon with his wisdom has accomplished this. He has shown understanding, shrewdness, creativity, and it worked! Case closed.

What now, though? Has what was wrong been set right?

These two friends . . . now their friendship lies in ruins. Who will make that right?

These two women . . . now they need to eat, bills need to be paid, and without each other, each is truly alone. Now one also has a baby to fend for. Now, back to the streets. They will be forever known as “prostitutes.” Who will make that right?

What of the one who lost the case? The court was right, and she is guilty. Not of her child's death. Of course not. It was an accident. But everything she did after? Kidnapping. Perjury. Calling for a baby's death. I sympathize with her. Still, of all these charges, she is guilty. Who will make that right?

Her child is still dead. A human being, made in God's image, is dead. Who will make that right?

² Leithard observes that the real mother's plea (v. 26) and Solomon's response (v. 27) are almost identical (p. 45).

³ See Leithart, 45 and John Goldingay, 1 & 2 Kings for Everyone (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 20.

Solomon has done all Solomon can do. His wise judgment has saved a child and its mother from a great wrong. That is something! Yet so much more is wrong. Wisdom is not enough.

V

Praise You, God, for You have given us One who is greater than Solomon.⁴

Solomon could devise a trick to get at the truth. But You know each person's mind and see our soul. You are wise to our ways and know perfectly well what to do with us. Jesus is greater than Solomon; he is Your wisdom. We praise You!

Solomon had the legal power to judge. With any human judgment, though, there must always be doubt. But with You is all truth, so Your verdicts will always be good, fair and reliable. Jesus is greater than Solomon; he is Your judgment. We praise You!

Solomon dispensed justice. He made things right. Some things. But You know much more is left un-just. You are making right whatever has gone wrong.

A friendship lies is torn to bits by betrayal and heartbreak. Jesus, You can reconcile them! You make right what has gone wrong. Your justice reconciles and, greater than Solomon, You are God's justice.

We use others and discard them. We down-trod precious people and then denounce them when they make desperate decisions. Jesus, You can redeem them! You right what has gone wrong. Your justice redeems and, greater than Solomon, You are God's justice.

We lie. We steal. We cheat. We perjure. We kidnap. We kill. We are guilty. You can rectify us. More than forgiveness, rectification makes right what has gone wrong. Your justice rectifies and, greater than Solomon, You are God's justice.

We die. Babies die. All die. But Jesus, You have risen from the dead, the first of all who will be raised. You make right what has gone wrong. Your justice raises the dead and, greater than Solomon, You are God's justice.

This is no split-decision. Your verdict is unanimous. Praise be to You, our Saviour and our God! Amen.

⁴ Jesus described himself as "greater than Solomon." See Matthew 12:42.