

# Solomon: A Study in Wisdom and Foolishness

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## SOLOMON—ARCHETYPE OR ECTYPE? <sup>1</sup>

A popular approach to character studies in the Scriptures is the ‘archetypal’ approach, where the figure’s life and actions are examined with the intention of being able to say either (or both):

- This person gives us an example to follow; if we do what he did right and avoid what he did wrong, then we will achieve the blessing, success, piety (etc.) that he did, and
- By examining the things that God did for this person, we can come to an understanding of how God can be expected to work today and in our lives.

Both of these can have some value if not taken too far; we are called to learn from the example of those who have gone before, either taking warning<sup>2</sup> in their disobedience or encouragement in their faith—for example, see Hebrews 3, 4, 11, 12. No doubt James had Solomon in mind when he said, ‘If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him’ (James 1:5). However, there is an immediate risk that, in doing so, we not only reduce the great narrative of salvation history to the level of a moralistic fable, but also that we overlook altogether the purpose of both the writer and the God who inspired him to write the account.

Numerous online forums discuss the question, ‘Was Solomon saved?’ with strong opinion expressed for both sides, although one must wonder what ultimate value these arguments have; generally they will lead to a semi-Pelagian conclusion that is based more on examining the actions of Solomon, comparing them with our own, and trying to conclude whether we are better, worse, or as good/bad as him; with the aim of trying to secure our own assurance. This approach not only trivialises the story of Solomon and its place in the big picture of salvation history, but also, by focussing on the actions of Solomon, can diminish the actions of the sovereign God whose action of grace is

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bingham points out the important distinction between archetype and ectype in a number of places, including *The Wisdom of God and the Healing of Man* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1990), p. 157 (footnote).

<sup>2</sup> A recently spotted bumper sticker read something like, ‘What if the sole purpose of your life was to be a warning to others?’

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much bigger than (although not precluding) selecting individuals through history to ‘save’ or ‘not save’. It is likely a product of our Western individualised Christianity that we would approach the text with a question like, ‘Is Solomon in heaven?’ when the author of 1 Kings has no intention of addressing the issue (and for him it most likely wasn’t even a theological category that crossed either his mind or that of his contemporaries).

It is clear that the writers of Kings and the Chronicles in presenting Solomon’s story have the aim of recording the outworking of God’s promise to David through Nathan, regarding the future of the kingdom:

The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall be established for ever (2 Sam. 7:11–16).<sup>3</sup>

And at the end of his life and reign, David gives the charge to his officials:

Of all my sons—and the LORD has given me many—he has chosen my son Solomon to sit on the throne of the kingdom of the LORD over Israel. He said to me: ‘Solomon your son is the one who will build my house and my courts, for I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father. I will establish his kingdom forever if he is unswerving in carrying out my commands and laws, as is being done at this time’ (1 Chron. 28:5–7).

While the ongoing narratives present Solomon to us as the ‘offspring’ of David, who both builds the temple and establishes the kingdom of Israel as a prominent nation among the nations, we understand that Nathan’s prophecy actually speaks of ‘David’s greater son’—the ‘Archetype’ of whom Solomon is but an ‘ectype’. Our purpose in looking at Solomon is so that we might see through him and beyond him to Christ. The purpose of this account of a wise, prosperous, temple-building king is to point us to the one ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:3); who has built and established the ‘holy temple in the Lord . . . in which God lives by His Spirit’ (Eph. 2:21–22).

### **THE GRACE OF GOD TOWARDS SOLOMON**

Within the story of Solomon we see a number of tensions that may to some appear to be contradictory elements:

- How could a man who is given the gift of wisdom, and told by God Himself that his ‘wise and discerning mind’ (NRSV), will be superior to that of anyone who has preceded or will succeed him (1 Kings 3:12), eventually turn to the foolishness of an idolatry of the most detestable form? <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scriptures quotations are from the New International Version.

<sup>4</sup> Chemosh and Molech, both called ‘detestable’ in 1 Kings 11:7, are thought to be two versions of the same god; they are similar in their ‘detestableness’ in that both demanded human sacrifice in order to be appeased.

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- How could God come to Solomon and seemingly give His approval by offering anything his heart desired, in the context of the practice of unlawful worship at a high place<sup>5</sup> and following an unlawful alliance with Israel's greatest historical enemy? (see 1 Kings 3:1–2).
- How could a man be enabled to build the house of the Lord, to dedicate it with such a prophetic prayer (1 Kings 8), and thus establish the true centralised worship of God in Israel, and himself be caught up into the false worship of idolatry?

This tension remains in the text, and for the honest reader and scholar, no amount of clever exegesis (i.e. isogesis) is able to resolve it. Two things must be said, though, which may help us to not only accept the tension, but even appreciate it:

- Solomon was a man who was no more and no less than us in need of the grace of God. That he was a recipient of the grace of God was apparent in that God said of him 'things that are not as though they were' (Rom. 4:17).<sup>6</sup> How much do we need to remind ourselves of this, not just in terms of our salvation, but also in terms of our ministry? I suspect that, for those in 'professional' ministry, a battle of conscience can at times occur when the lavish blessing of God is seen despite the plainness and brokenness of the vessel; when we know the sordid secrets of our own hearts and yet are amazed at the grace of God that He still uses us.
- The wisdom and foolishness of Solomon is in the end a small part of the bigger picture of what God was accomplishing and has accomplished in Christ. If the gift of wisdom and favour of God that came to Solomon, and to Israel through him, was on the basis of his own purity and piety, then Christ died for nothing. The writer makes no attempt to cover up Solomon's foolishness because, even if he didn't realise it, he was looking for the 'one greater than Solomon'; that for which the latter prophets 'searched intently and with the greatest care' (1 Pet. 1:10). Our folly does not hinder the plan of God—instead, in His sovereign wisdom, it serves His purpose by magnifying even more the treasures of wisdom found in Christ.

In 1 Kings 3:3, the writer tells us that 'Solomon loved the LORD' (ESV). This indicates a deep personal piety—no doubt inculcated by his father David, and is a statement given as a fulfilment of the command given him by David in 2:2–3. Yet there is the qualification in 3:3–4 that he offered sacrifices at the high places. The fact that the people were using the high places 'because no house had yet been built for the Name of the LORD' (3:2) did not excuse their actions, nor did it justify Solomon's.<sup>7</sup> So we see here a man who had a deep love for his God, yet in the midst of this genuine relationship still demonstrating weakness—one that will become much more apparent later in

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<sup>5</sup> While the Tabernacle was located at the high place at Gibeon, and one might therefore argue that to worship there was technically lawful, this argument is nevertheless tempered by the fact that this was not the only high place at which Solomon offered sacrifice.

<sup>6</sup> While the context of Romans 4:17 is childless Abraham receiving by faith the promise that he would be the father of nations, it nevertheless communicates a principle of grace in that God imputes righteousness to the sinner and says, 'Well done, good and faithful servant' while the object of His grace has done nothing at all of merit.

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 5, above.

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his life as he allows his many wives to lead him further into the path of idolatry. The other statement that sets the scene for this encounter with God is that Solomon had entered into a marriage covenant with the king of Egypt. The Israelites were explicitly forbidden to return to Egypt (Deut. 17:16) and the king was to affirm this by avoiding any commercial or political arrangement with Egypt that would result in the Israelites returning there.<sup>8</sup> So this treaty with the Pharaoh is flagged as another marker that points forward to his direct infringement of the prohibition upon the king to accumulate a large number of horses, and those from Egypt.

The writer of 1 Kings presents these two facts of an unlawful political treaty and illegitimate worship, without any apparent concern to reconcile them with Solomon's love for the Lord,<sup>9</sup> possibly because he is not wanting to see Solomon categorised along with the subsequent kings of Israel and Judah who 'did evil in the eyes of the LORD'. Even though this statement is made of him in reference to the end of his life (1 Kings 11:6), it is nevertheless not used in his introduction. The reader is first of all to hear of the great wisdom given to him for ruling, and of his building and dedication of the temple; and to see that these two are inextricably linked, as we will below.

In 1 Kings 3:3, we are also told that Solomon's love for the Lord was demonstrated in 'walking in the statutes of David his father', a reference to the charge given him just before David's death:

So be strong, show yourself a man, and observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go, and that the LORD may keep his promise to me: 'If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel' (1 Kings 2:2–4).

In 1 Chronicles 29, the writer also shows that David passed on to his son the mandate to build the temple, and had ensured that most if not all of the materials and personnel required for the task were ready for Solomon to utilise.

While on the surface it seems that Solomon was faithful to this charge, we see the blessings evident in the prospering of his reign. Yet both the wisdom with which he judged and the task of building the temple were a gift, for we know that Solomon, in and of himself, apart from the gracious action of God towards him and towards Israel, would only be able to produce foolishness and idolatry.

### **THE GIVING OF WISDOM TO SOLOMON**

Solomon's request for wisdom (1 Kings 3:5–9) is based on his youthfulness and sense of inadequacy to fulfil his role of king over a nation as large as Israel:

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<sup>8</sup> While several of the later prophets communicated this prohibition explicitly, apart from this place in Deuteronomy the Pentateuch appears only to contain it in the form of a promise, 'And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again"' (Exod. 14:13, ESV). However, to act against the expressed will of God given in the form of a promise is essentially the same as disobedience to a command.

<sup>9</sup> G. Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom: Israel's Wisdom Literature in the Christian Life*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1993, p. 62.

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But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number (1 Kings 3:7b–8).

We don't know his age at the time of his coronation. He may have been considered to be quite young for the role, but more likely this is a statement about wisdom and foolishness. Youth is at times associated with foolishness (Prov. 1:4); that which makes a boy a man is not necessarily his chronological age, but his maturity before God and men (see Luke 2:52). An old man may still be as a child if he has not attained wisdom. So, by acknowledging his youth, Solomon is essentially admitting to foolishness, and hence his request for 'an understanding mind'—literally 'a heart that hears'—to be able to both hear and obey the words and commands of God and to apply them in his role as king.

Solomon also understands that his request must be based on the faithfulness of God to His word, and that his position as king is not of his own doing, but because God promised and willed it.

Solomon in his request is actually demonstrating that he already possesses the wisdom he asks for. He has shown discernment in not asking for material prosperity and in his desire to faithfully discharge his responsibility. It could be said that it takes great wisdom for a person to recognise and confess their own profound foolishness without any display of false humility. In this sense Solomon had to first be a recipient of the gift, in order to even be able to ask for it; and in asking he discovers that by the gracious hand of God he is actually a recipient of immeasurably more than he could ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20).

The celebrated incident that follows, with the two women fighting over a baby, is a sign to Israel that Solomon's wisdom came from God (1 Kings 3:28); not just in that he resolved the dispute, or that it was done in a way that defies logic, but also that he gives justice and shows compassion to a prostitute! This gift of wisdom was a wisdom to 'govern your people', not to be used for Solomon's personal gain; nor was it a purely forensic ability to apply the letter of the law. Again, James may have been reflecting on Solomon, and maybe this story, when he wrote:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness (James 3:13–18).

Solomon was living up to his name as the 'peaceful one' by dispensing a wisdom that brought both domestic and political peace.

### **THE BUILDING AND DEDICATION OF THE TEMPLE: THE WISDOM OF WORSHIP**

This account of 'practical wisdom' seems rather to be given as a background or introduction to the central activity of Solomon's reign in building the temple. In this

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we see the fullest expression of wisdom: *The fear of the Lord that leads to a worship that is reverent and repentant, and with a confidence in God's covenant with His people and His purpose among the nations.* It will be helpful to spend some time in his prayer of dedication in 1 Kings 8:22ff. The prayer is an acknowledgement of who God is as the sovereign ruler and righteous judge of both His people and the nations.

Solomon acknowledges that the Lord does not live in temples built by hands:

But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! (1 Kings 8:27).

The temple in all its magnificence and opulence was just a token of the greatness and beauty of God in all His glory; while it was a much 'better' copy than the tabernacle, it was still, nevertheless, just a copy of the 'true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man' (Heb. 8:2). So there is no sense of him saying, 'Now that I have built this house for you, you are now obligated to dwell here and here alone—we've got you cornered so we can now exploit you to our own ends!' Yet there is a sense of wonder in this prayer that the God of the universe would condescend to focus His attention on this one people, on the temple they have built, and that this temple would be the means through which their prayers would be heard and their sins would be forgiven.

A recurring theme through the prayer is that of justice and forgiveness: 'Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive' (1 Kings 8:30). God's actions of judgement will lead His people ('when', not 'if') to repentance. This justice and forgiveness is extended in times of personal conflict (8:31f.), defeat (8:33f.), drought (8:35f.), plague (8:37f.) and exile (8:46f.), all of which themselves are actions of God's wrath that require propitiation, not incidental or accidental disasters from which they need rescuing. And the goal of these actions of judgement and forgiveness is:

... so that they will fear you all the time they live in the land you gave our fathers (8:40).

So, as the people come to worship their God at (or towards) the temple and see the action of God in judging, forgiving and restoring them, they will not be just a people ruled by a wise king, but a wise people who live in reverence and fear of their God. We might compartmentalise wisdom into that which has to do purely with the 'everyday' practicalities of living or with specific ministries like counselling, yet to worship the Father in spirit and truth is also true wisdom, and anyone who professes to be wise must demonstrate this wisdom in their desire for the honour and renown of their God. True wisdom is expressed in true worship. Wisdom without a conscious acknowledgement of and delight in God as the source of all wisdom and knowledge is actually foolishness.

Solomon acknowledges that this blessing and privilege of fearing God is not reserved for Israel alone. Israel exists so that this blessing might come to every nation. Just as God will achieve His purposes for Israel through judgement and forgiveness, so too will He assuredly achieve His purpose of blessing the nations: 'for they *shall* hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm' (8:42). While Solomon does not ask for forgiveness for the covenant-outsider, he asks that their requests be granted so that: 'all the peoples of the earth may know your name and *fear* you' (8:43). So the nations too will know wisdom as they both hear of the acts of

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God, and come to worship Him because of His revelation of His eternal power and divine nature to them.

We see an answer to this prayer in the visit of the queen of Sheba ('Queen of the South'—Luke 11:31—possibly Ethiopia):

When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions (1 Kings 10:1).

It is significant that the only fame Solomon had was due to 'his relation to the name of the LORD'; the queen came not just to meet with Solomon but also with his God. It is also significant that a monarch would be prepared to travel such a great distance for 'diplomatic' purposes—the standard practice would be to send a retinue to negotiate on their behalf, while they remained to ensure their throne was secure. This queen was risking losing her kingdom for the sake of finding wisdom from Solomon and his God.<sup>10</sup> She was not disappointed: verse 5 reads literally, 'she was left breathless'. Her response demonstrates a true fear of the Lord:

Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness (1 Kings 10:9).

And the queen of Sheba was just the beginning:

The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift—articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules (1 Kings 10:24–25).

Any Israelite hearing this account might feel they have cause for great nationalistic pride—provided they stopped at the end of chapter 10. Solomon's downfall, through his wives, into idolatry serves as a solemn warning to anyone who might begin to presume on or take credit for any wisdom they may have. But, as has been said earlier, the purpose of this story is not to teach a moral for us to emulate (or avoid). The honest, shocking and bewildering report that, 'Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done' (1 Kings 11:6), is virtually a retraction of the introductory assessment that 'Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David' (1 Kings 3:3). There can be no suggestion that Solomon was the paragon of wisdom; for apart from the grace of God he is just another one who claimed to be wise, and became a fool, and traded the glory of God for idols (Rom. 1:22–23). As was said earlier, this foolishness of Solomon causes us to look beyond him to the One he foreshadows. In the sovereign wisdom of God, Solomon's fall was not an unplanned glitch in the outworking of salvation history; his foolishness highlights by way of contrast the manifold wisdom of God, and his idolatry shows the righteousness of God. If the writer had stopped short of revealing this fall, we might be tempted to look to Solomon as an archetype, instead of through and beyond him to Christ.

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<sup>10</sup> Dr Philip Ryken, 'Solomon and the Queen of Sheba', sermon given at 10<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, 6 Jan. 2008.

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The visit of the queen of Sheba and the international fame of Solomon foreshadows another age when the nations will gather to worship and hear wisdom from the lips of this ‘greater than Solomon’:

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it (Rev. 21:22–26).

It is significant here that, to whatever extent this vision is eschatological, there is no abolishment of the nations with the consummation of history and the teleological establishment of the kingdom of God. In this era the nations exist for and by the glory of God and the Lamb; they walk in their light—which surely is nothing other than the fullness of the wisdom<sup>11</sup> of God manifest in Christ the Great High Priest–Lamb who leads all nations and all creation in worship, as the kings of the earth bring their glory and lay their crowns at the foot of the throne (Rev. 4:10).

The queen of Sheba was a woman of faith. She came to see Solomon, but was visited herself by Christ. She stands as a warning to those who have seen Christ face-to-face and yet refuse to acknowledge him:

The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here (Luke 11:31).

The people of Jesus’ day lacked the faith to recognise the full expression of wisdom in the arrival of their long-awaited Messiah, and their condemnation is that the queen of Sheba saw but a shadow of Christ in the weak and insufficient Solomon, and still she believed. No less is this warning applicable to every generation since—to both us and those to whom we proclaim:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:20–24).

Bound up in this warning is the wonderful hope of the gospel. The essence of foolishness is to reject Christ, but the heart of true wisdom is to worship the Father through him.

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<sup>11</sup> The writer of Ecclesiastes likens wisdom to light (and folly to darkness): ‘I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness’ (Eccl. 2:13, 14); also Ps. 119:130: ‘The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple’—see above on Solomon’s request for an ‘understanding heart’.